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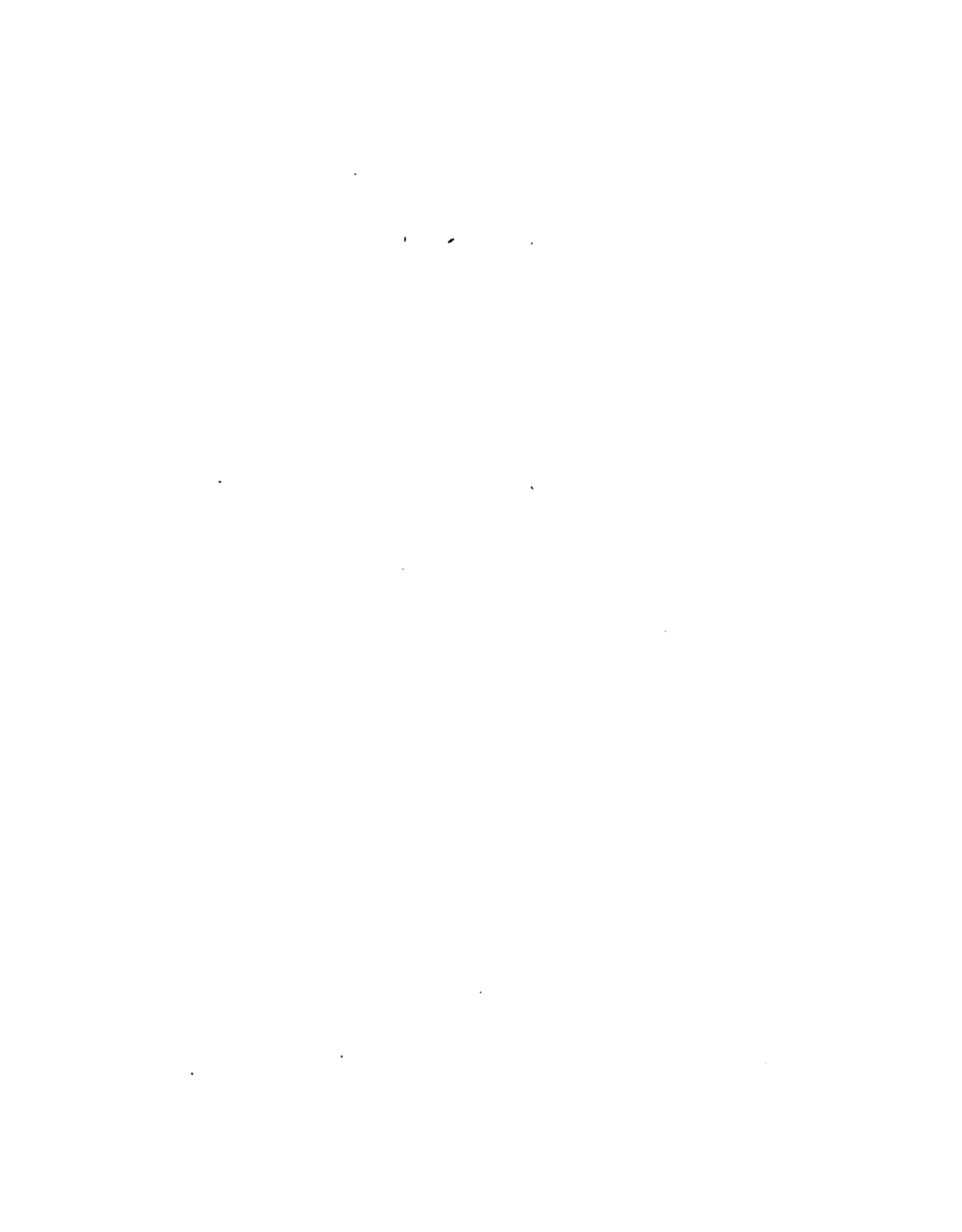
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1. The first part of the document is a list of names and addresses of the members of the committee.

2. The second part of the document is a list of names and addresses of the members of the committee.

TORN LACE.

*"To say what you have done is not always to say
what you are. And only what you are matters eternally."*
—ROBERT HICHENS, *"The Garden of Allah."*

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TORN LACE

By
CHARLOTTE
MANSFIELD

The Walter Scott .
Publishing Co., Ltd.,
London, Newcastle-
on-Tyne, and New
York

1904.

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CHAPTER I.

MIMI was certainly pretty, that was an indisputable fact; and although a child, the love-light of the South shone in her large, dark eyes, waiting to be called forth into flame—soft, gentle, when the sun set in the valley and all the world seemed to repose in yellow glory, yet flashing as did the mountain fires when the snow melted and the sun fired the undergrowth. Her body was lithe as the mountain ponies bred to climb, and her step had not yet lost its elasticity through wearing the wooden sabots of the peasantry; her petticoats were short, and her hair long, black, and somewhat rebellious,

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as her nature, refusing to be hidden under the little shawl, embroidered in many bright colours, and given to her long ago by her grandmother—a wrinkled old hussy, who, having forgotten the joy of life, yet lived on, robbing death of a just victim. They dwelt together these two in a dilapidated tenement at San Mamette, a tiny village on the edge of the Lake Lugano, and all the summer through Mimi sold picture-postcards at the small landing-stage to the many tourists. Donna Natalie stayed at home and played with the cat, gossiping between whiles with the neighbours, and cooking an occasional meal of macaroni or dried fish. She was, so she said, too old for work, and would not have done it had her years been less. Certainly the two rooms did not bear evidence of much industry; the dirt of ages had toned down the originally bright tints of the painted walls and ceilings, and the sun-curtains of the little balcony were

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dropping to pieces bit by bit. Filth and age within, barter and bribery without, such was Mimi's first knowledge of life. Time had been when Donna Natalie had traded in a small way between the little villages; but preferring thieving to thrift, she had combined smuggling with commerce.

The Lake Lugano covers both Swiss and Italian territory, but the Customs men visiting the steamers had been as sharp as Natalie, and only the bright eyes and saucy smile of Mimi had saved her from gaol. However, she grew tired of being searched, and was too selfish to bribe; so, providing Mimi brought home the necessary money, was contented to do nothing.

Mimi was thirteen when she had the first glimpse of human love. The amours of animal life had always fascinated her—she knew not why; and her curiosity was piqued into greater intensity when her grandmother would tell her

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to go about her business and keep her bold eyes for the tourists.

"Always sell to the men, Mimi," she would say; "and if you smile, maybe you will get a few extra centimes."

So Mimi smiled for love of centimes, not for love of man—as yet.

On her thirteenth birthday, Pierre, who claimed a distant cousinship, asked leave to take Mimi the whole trip of the lake—not a long journey, but holidays were rare with Mimi, and a few hours on the water, instead of by its side, meant indeed a birthday treat. At first Natalie demurred, but Pierre, who waited on the tourists with meat and drink when they preferred to sit in the stuffy saloon instead of enjoying the air off the mountains, was firm, and finally Natalie gave in, only Mimi must not go alone; she, Natalie, would accompany her. Pierre had not bargained for this, and Natalie grinned when she saw his

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expression of disappointment, and observed, with a shrug of her bent shoulders: "The wench is pretty, and you, Pierre, are a man."

"Mimi will soon be a woman," Pierre replied; "then I shall marry her."

Natalie laughed as she said: "No, no, boy; keep to your dirty dishes and centimes. Mimi shall wear silk and gamble with gold; she is not for you. Still, you are a nice boy, and we will be your guests to-day."

Pierre, with his native politeness, bowed at the honour and cursed in his heart at that which was withheld.

So on the momentous morning, Mimi, knowing nothing of the heartburning her bright eyes had caused, was full of merriment, like a squirrel in spring. Not having been taught that cleanliness is the chief of Nature's free luxuries, she lost no time by washing her white bodice; instead, she let her hair hang wild, and in place of the accustomed shawl,

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draped a small piece of black lace she had picked up in the market-place one saint's-day at Lugano, and in her hair she stuck a rose, faded and dirty, but still red, for colour and joy, do they not go together? Natalie cooked some fish, and put it, with a roll of bread and a piece of sausage, into her huge pocket, for she was greedy as an old fowl, and fowls and women are the most difficult of all creatures to satisfy. Pierre might prove negligent, and forget Natalie's stomach while peering into Mimi's face.

It was a lovely day; the sun shone brightly, but not with too much heat, for it was spring-time, and the vines had not yet borne their berries. The mountains were very beautiful; Mimi felt their beauty unconsciously, as cats love warmth without knowledge as to what really is the science of heat. There were many tourists on deck, and Natalie regretted that Mimi had not brought her tray of picture-post-

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cards; but Pierre reminded her that she and Mimi were there as his guests, and the captain would not have allowed traffic. Pierre did not add that the captain had offered him a bribe to induce the bright-eyed Mimi to go for a trip. He had consented, pocketed the five-franc piece, and secretly enjoyed the captain's chagrin when Mimi arrived *accompanied by Natalie*. A chaperon had not been included in the bargain; but Pierre did not think it necessary to return the money. Pierre was an Italian, and though by nature jealous, the weather-beaten aged captain gave him no qualms of uneasiness.

It was not long before the Customs officials espied Natalie, and while one demanded that she immediately turn out her pockets, another playfully untied her apron-strings, and in reply to her curses smilingly remarked: "*Mia bella Natalie*, we have missed you sorely; but the Government is the richer by your absence."

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Pierre, seeing that Natalie's attention was engaged, drew Mimi away, and together they walked to the other end of the boat. But alas for sentiment! Pierre had his duties as a waiter to see to, and before he had time to speak of love a man called him and ordered some Munich beer.

Standing alone, Mimi took a great interest in the people around her. She knew a little of most modern languages; the quay is an excellent school for the would-be linguist, and Mimi was quick to learn, therefore the conversation of the tourists amused her. Angular governesses studied guide-books; fat papas, on the strength of a few days' visit in former years, gave lectures on the surrounding scenery to their submissive wives and bored children; one man, heated by argument and laager beer, and stronger in confidence than in geography, declared that the Mount Salvatori had changed its position, and formerly stood more to lee-

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ward! But Mimi's attention became riveted on two Germans, evidently a couple on their honeymoon. Utterly callous to the observation of others, they sat locked in each other's arms, and when their lips ceased to meet they patted each other's hands, their eyes seeing only themselves mirrored in each other's orbs. People smiled as they passed them by, but they were of the bourgeois class, and heeded them not; for naught can shame a bourgeois's love, and only a succession of fat, hungry babies put an end to it. Mimi stood quite near and gazed. What were they to each other, these two? The girl was not pretty; Mimi felt nothing but scorn for the snub nose and colourless complexion surrounded by Teutonic, colourless hair; her figure was squat and lumpy, and her clothing unpicturesque. No, she was not pretty; but Mimi hated her, nevertheless. She had something that Mimi did not possess. What? The man also had no charm, but the

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girl seemed entranced; and yet, though Mimi watched a long time, she did not see him give her anything. Why, then, did she smile at him?

Pierre found Mimi thus. He touched her. "Mimi, Mimi," he cried, but she heeded him not; the two lovers attracted and fascinated her: they were so utterly lost in each other. For them no other life meant aught.

"Mimi," Pierre spoke again. "Why do you stare so, Mimi?"

"They don't see me," Mimi replied, without turning her head. "What are they, Pierre? They have forgotten that others live. No, they don't see me."

"They are afire with *la grande passion*," Pierre said reverently. "They have recently been wed by the curé at Weggis, and they love; but they are only phlegmatic Teutons," he added with scorn and a toss of the head. "Only we Italians really know how to love!"

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"Ah! but you could not look at me like that," Mimi answered, withdrawing her gaze from the lovers and turning her large, wondering eyes questioningly towards Pierre. She followed him as he walked away.

"Yes, yes, I could!" Pierre muttered hoarsely, and quickly drawing her down the two steps which led to the little steamer kitchen, he kissed her full on the lips.

But alas for romance! Pierre had just finished the remains of Munich beer left in a customer's glass. Mimi was not refined, but she disliked beer; and drawing the back of her hand rapidly across her mouth, she gave Pierre an angry glance and darted away.

The light in the German girl's eyes had not been kindled in Mimi's.

CHAPTER II.

Two years passed away, and Mimi developed as much during that time as a Northerner would have done in seven years. Her eyes still looked boldly at life, but her senses had begun to anticipate its mysteries. Her soul! Had not the fat curé at the little chapel heard her confess regularly, and as regularly patted her cheek or squeezed her hand, and told her she must confess all to him—all, quite all; for was he not a priest and her adviser? So he questioned until she began to wish she might have answers wherewith to answer. Mimi grew quite fond of the dirty little church with its lurid paintings and torn lace, strongly smelling incense, and dripping candles; she never noticed the dust on the floor or the greasy clothes of

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the priest. Being an Italian peasant, she ignored filth, and only admired finery.

When the heat became too intense for the tourists, and the grapes on the vines were hanging heavily, almost drunk with their own lusciousness, then Natalie would look around for work for Mimi. There were no tourists to buy picture-postcards, but there were many, like Pierre, longing to win her, and "a girl must work hard or love," Natalie wisely reflected. So Mimi helped a laundress who washed for the few fine ladies residing in Lugano, and once a week accompanied her by steamer to Lugano to deliver the snowy garments and take away the soiled. The laundress—by name Mademoiselle Pauline—was of an age when love ceases to be possible for oneself and is hated for others; so Natalie trusted the pretty Mimi to her care without misgiving, well knowing she would be well watched, and all backsliding on her part faithfully recounted.

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Natalie would have preferred, for some reasons, that Mimi should have worked in the vineyard near the lake, and thus have been under her watchful eyes; but that would have meant burning her face and staining her hands, and this need not occur when washing the clothes in the mountain streams; and Natalie wished to preserve Mimi's beauty.

Mademoiselle Pauline was a Frenchwoman, and could teach well how to starch and goffer and get up the clothes daintily, as, indeed, it was done in "La belle France." Mimi did not dislike the work; she grew to love the scent of the garments, and almost regretted when they were delivered clean and sweet, but said to herself, "They will come back to me again, these clothes, and in the meantime they will have lived." For to Mimi, bereft of the healthy influence of playmates, all inanimate objects told weird little stories, each their own; and, strange as it may seem, she grew to know the

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different owners not so much by the garments themselves as by their odour. Most she loved some little dainty lawn lingerie beautifully trimmed with Valenciennes lace. She would hold up a garment and say to Pauline:

“Milady is, ah! so pretty. See the dear little legs; and she has, yes, worn blue ribbons this week. Here is one tiny thread, you dear;” and sometimes she would kiss the garment before she dipped it into the stream.

Pauline would shrug her shoulders and say, “*Vous êtes bête.*”

Mimi only laughed low and played with her thoughts. Once she stole a piece of a torn frill, and Natalie found her pinning it round her knee.

“What have you there, child?” she asked.

“Only a pretty rag Pauline gave me,” Mimi replied.

Natalie stretched out her bony hand, and before Mimi could prevent her snatched it away.

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"It is pretty," she said, "but not a rag, and Pauline did not give it to you."

Mimi scowled, and Natalie continued in a coaxing voice, handing back the lace: "There you are, *mia bella*; lie to others if you will and as you must, but never to your old grandmother. Tell me the truth, *petite*, always the truth."

Mimi looked at her grandmother with something of the old woman's avarice in her own eyes, then she followed the glance of the beady black eyes beneath the shaggy brows, and became conscious of her naked leg, and with the vanity of inborn perception said:

"My leg is pretty too, but I want lace."

The old woman drew still nearer and said:

"You shall have it—some day."

And she did.

CHAPTER III.

PIERRE had not altered much, grown more sun-tanned perhaps, and his feet had spread after the nature of waiter's feet. He still waited on the pleasure steamers in spring and early summer, serving coffee and emptying the dregs of the beer glasses down his throat instead of over the side of the boat. When the weather was too hot for tourists he would lie under the vines and smoke, and wish he had a wife to work for him. In the winter he would go to Chiasso, or even as far as Milan, and serve in a café, but he never wandered farther afield. He lacked enterprise, and his small amount of energy was merely the outcome of habit—so many Italians have none. He had been taught to carry

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while running, and probably would have spilled the viands and broken the crockery had he ventured to walk. When not hurrying in his shuffling, shoulder-forward-waiter's gait, he was always sleeping or smoking. When he thought at all, his thoughts turned to Mimi, but he saw very little of her; Natalie had left the dirty tenement-house by the side of the lake and gone to live at Lugano, taking Mimi with her. Pauline also had removed her laundry to the town, but that was not the chief cause of Natalie changing her quarters. The old crone had plans, not of an exalted nature, but for that same reason all the more likely to be fruitful. Ideals are for poets and paupers; the cult of the former was unknown to Natalie, the latter she dreaded to be.

Mimi grew still more pretty, but the increase of her beauty brought less liberty; she was never alone. Natalie's eyes were always upon her at home, and Pauline was on guard abroad;

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so the men might ogle and the boys throw kisses, Mimi must not look. Her only pleasure was on Sunday afternoons, when she and Natalie sat in the Public Gardens, and sometimes Natalie dozed; then Mimi fed the birds in the large aviaries, and contrived to gossip without restraint with those who stood near. But she soon tired of so monotonous a life, her Southern nature called for freedom and love; she envied the mating birds; she hated the work-girls who had lovers instead of grandmothers. Natalie realised that Mimi had taken to pawing the ground; she therefore determined to mature her plans before Mimi, growing more restive, should kick over the traces and take the bit of life between her teeth. So with this end in view, she bade Mimi, one evening when her work was done, put on her Sabbath lace mantilla and wash her face. Mimi put on the lace, but did not bother to wash her face; it was pretty, that was

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enough; and, holy saints! was not a handful of water each morning sufficient for any woman? Natalie did not insist; it is when one is approaching middle age one must take more care: the quite young or very old need not trouble. Youth has sufficient attraction without attention to detail; age cannot attract under any conditions, and for what other object were women made save to allure the opposite sex?

Natalie had taken care not to cultivate Mimi's brains; to her mind learning was waste of time—only bodies being negotiable. The world is much alike the world over, and the wicked old Italian woman was not far from the same plane of thought as the English royal personage, who, on being asked if he liked much-educated women, replied: "Bright? Yes; but no damned intellect!"

Mimi had a cunning avarice with figures, could cull the horrors from an Italian news-

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paper, and make herself understood in either German, French, or English. Of book-lore she had none, but held her head like an empress, and her eyes were more beautiful than any books. On that sweet spring evening Natalie looked at her critically, and was satisfied.

"Where are we going?" Mimi asked. "Not to the Opera? Oh, *grand'mère*, you have promised so often!"

But Natalie shook her head and replied: "No, *petite*; I have no money for the Opera. We are going to sell flowers up at the Hôtel Florence."

"Flowers?" Mimi opened wide her eyes; this was a new trade for her.

"And where are we to get them, pray? And why wear my lace mantilla? It will get messed, and the new curé comes on Sunday."

"Priests have no money," Natalie said scornfully. "Keep your smiles for the folks at the

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grand hotel. There is an English milord; give your smiles to him."

"But I hate the English!" Mimi pouted. "The women have long, pale faces like cows; and the men!—ugh, the men!—they are cowards; their eyes are cold, and they never pay extra centimes for the postcards if their women are near. They are cowards—they would not fight for me—they carry no knives; they wear hideous clothes, and are angry if we do not understand their language; but they do not learn ours; they are too proud of their own, and it is so ugly—like themselves—so ugly!"

"But they have money," Natalie replied, as she pinned her shawl over her head.

"Yes," Mimi answered, and she smiled at her grandmother, and the smile was not good to see.

They lived close to the market-place, and as they walked along, their sabots clanking on the

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rough stone cobbles, a few stall-holders who yet lingered called out their wares, but Natalie shook her head. Neither did they make any purchases at the quaint open-fronted shops which lay back in the shadows under the pillared colonnade that ran round the square.

"Where, then, shall we get flowers?" Mimi asked.

"Donna Nuro has roses," Natalie replied.

"Oh, but she will not sell except at a great price. She is saving them for the fête," Mimi cried.

"She will sell cheap," Natalie muttered. "Nuro is dead and waits burial. She will have a Mass said for his soul, and is a fool to waste good money on a dead man; he goes to hell just the same, the curé pats his fat paunch, and I—I get the flowers cheap. Here we are. You stay outside, Mimi."

"But I should like to see Nuro," Mimi protested. "I have seen a dead ox and a dead

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dog, and once we fished up a dead baby out of the lake, but never a dead man. Let me go in, *grand'mère*—one peep.”

“No, no,” said Natalie, and she crossed herself as she pushed open the wooden door. Habit is stronger than belief; so Natalie, believing the man’s soul to be in hell, and having no thought as to the possibility of herself ever reaching heaven, still crossed herself as she entered the dark, dirty room.

Across the window had been hung an old sail, and two candles flickered weirdly as the open door let in a flood of sweet spring twilight. A woman sprang up from the ground at the click of the opening door; she had been kneeling beside a straw mattress on which lay the corpse of her husband: two tapers flickered at his head, a rough wooden crucifix lay on his breast. The woman’s face was lined with care and shadowed with sorrow; she was surprised to see Natalie, who was not wont to

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pay visits of condolence, and she pushed back her dishevelled black hair with trembling fingers as she asked:

"You, Donna Natalie! What do you want?"

"You have roses to sell," Natalie answered.

"I? roses? Yes, yes, there are roses: I shall make a great cross for Nuro, and the Holy Virgin shall have some, too."

"Have you any money to pay for the Mass?" Natalie queried.

"Money?" the woman seemed dazed. "Nuro is dead!—do you know Nuro is really dead?"

"He beat you when he was alive," Natalie cruelly answered.

"I would to God he could come back and beat me again," the woman moaned, striking her breasts with shaking hands.

This display of emotion seemed to Natalie but waste of time, and she spoke somewhat sharply as she said:

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"You know, Donna Nuro, you have no money for the Mass; come, I will buy your roses—how much?"

"The good curé will wait for the money," the woman answered meekly, and her hands fell limply to her side.

"You are a fool," Natalie cried. "See, there is a bruise on your forehead, and a red scar on your wrist—Nuro gave you those, and you would waste your roses."

The woman gazed at the scar on her wrist and tears fell from her eyes and wet the ugly mark. She seemed to have forgotten Natalie's presence as she murmured: "Yes, Nuro gave me that," then she kissed the scar, and turning abruptly away from Natalie knelt down by the silent corpse of what had once been a brutal, low-bred Italian—a drunkard, thief, and unfaithful. But he had been her man!

Natalie wasted no more time; she quickly rejoined Mimi, and taking her by the hand, said:

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"She will not sell; she is a fool. We will take!"

They crept together softly through the rusty old gate leading to the garden where the roses and vines grew, and gathered the blooms—red, white, and pink, laughing softly, while the owner wept within.

"There is no need to return through the market," Natalie observed. "We will cross by the cathedral and go through the Piazza St. James; it leads straight to the Hôtel Florence."

"And then?" Mimi queried.

"You will sell the flowers; it will soon be past the dinner-hour. The men will smoke in the balcony, and talk about the air off the mountains above mingling with the flower-laden breath from the valleys below; but they will smoke their big cigars and love that scent best, *tiens*; I know 'em."

"How?" Mimi asked.

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"I was not always old," Natalie replied.

Mimi wondered still more. She would have liked to have heard of those days before Natalie grew old, but dared not ask. She looked at her grandmother sideways as they trudged along, and with the criticism of youth gazing at the impotence of age, concluded that Natalie must always have been ugly, and mentally exclaimed:

"I, Mimi—I shall never be bent and withered and toothless as she is!"

The twilight does not last long in Lugano; by the time they had reached the Hôtel Florence the sky was turning violet, and the electric lights from the hotel shone forth with pale brilliancy.

"You stand here," said Natalie, motioning Mimi to a spot where the light from the hall-door shone full on her face, and any one traversing the balcony could not fail to see her.

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"Sell your roses singly," Natalie said. "I will stand here," and she stepped into the shadow of a group of fir-trees.

They had not long to wait. Soon two of the French-windows were thrown open by a waiter; he proceeded to arrange coffee-cups on little tables. Then a lady appeared—a big, fair, selfish woman of certain years and uncertain whims. The air was clear, each word could be distinctly heard as she said in hard, metallic tones:

"I intend to have my coffee out here, James. If you think it chilly, stay within; Dick will look after me. Dick, where are you?"

"Coming, Lady Blanche," replied a lazy voice, and an old young man appeared.

Dick, or, to give him the benefit of his full title (an honour rarely paid him), Lord Henry Richard Venzey Turner, belonged to the type of Englishmen latterly becoming so numerous,

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who are born in too high a sphere to become middle-class "bounders," and of not sufficiently exalted intelligence to earn an honest living. Ploughed for the army, possessing too lurid a college record even for a fashionable church, Dick had "done things" in the city until, having lost most of his relatives' money and possessing none of his own, he found it expedient to plead ill-health as an excuse for a holiday abroad.

The Lady Blanche Murnton having grown tired of her husband, and not caring for pet dogs, chose to consider herself a neglected wife. She conceived a violent attachment for Dick. In reality it was indigestion, not love, that weighed down her heart. However, as Sir James Murnton was rich and Lady Blanche reigned as commander-in-chief over his banking account, Dick rather enjoyed the *rôle* of a bill-paid lover, though at times the lady was apt to be somewhat exacting; at any

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rate, he, not being her husband, thought so. Selecting the most comfortable chair without asking her ladyship to make a choice, Dick lounged, smoking a cigar, while Lady Blanche, dismissing the waiter, poured out his coffee, and he helped himself to a *liqueur*.

Mimi admired neither the woman nor the man, but she was there to sell, so raising the roses high above her head, she cried, "A bouquet, madam, a bouquet?"

"Great Scot! what a pretty girl!" Dick cried, nearly upsetting the table as he turned his head the more easily to see her.

"My dear Dick, you've spoilt my gown," said Lady Blanche, peevishly pointing to a tiny splash of coffee which she had purposely dropped.

"Sorry," said Dick, without turning his head.

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"That is the man, Mimi," cried Natalie in soft Italian from the shadows of the fir-trees.

"A bouquet, milord, a bouquet?" cried Mimi, and coming close under the balcony, she laughed saucily up into Dick's face.

Dick felt in his pocket; as usual, he had no money.

"Shall I go and get you some flowers, Blanche?" he asked. "Lend me five francs, will you? They really are beauties."

"The roses are faded, and the girl is an impostor," Lady Blanche replied. "Come, we will finish our coffee indoors. James was right; it really is chilly."

"Damn!" cursed Dick under his breath, but he left the balcony obediently.

Several men then strolled out, and Mimi would again have proffered her roses, but Natalie darted forward and stopped her. "Come away, child," she whispered; "you have done enough for to-night."

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"But I have not sold any," Mimi replied.

"But the English milord, he has seen you," chuckled Natalie.

"Ah! but he has no money. I heard him ask the big, painted woman for some."

"He has too much to carry in his little pockets. All English milords have money," Natalie answered.

"But the fat woman, whose breasts grow out from her neck, is she his mother?" asked Mimi as they walked away.

"No, no," answered Natalie; "she is English madam. All English madams cry 'Shocking!' at the French or Italian mistress, but each one has her *bel ami* to kiss her insipid face, while her husband carries her wraps. Ah! she would like the brave-looking milord to be her lap-dog, but he shall be yours, Mimi, if you are good and do as I tell you."

"Ah!" sighed Mimi; then added, "but the roses; what shall we do with the roses?"

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“ Put them away ; they will live in the dark,
and another night will come.”

“ Why not the day ? ” Mimi asked.

“ Men learn wisdom in the morning ; they
spend their wealth at night,” Natalie replied.

CHAPTER IV.

THE next night Natalie bade Mimi get ready to sell roses. Mimi finished her supper with despatch and ran to the small cracked mirror which hung on the wall.

"Lower your bodice; it is too high at the neck," said the critical Natalie. "The English don't believe in what they can't see. For them, there is no beauty in mystery."

"You know a lot about the English," retorted Mimi.

"I was maid once to a countess in the big, dark, dirty London; that was long ago. I have almost forgotten the place, but not their ways. Ah! it is easy for an Italian to win love. Their women are like their climate—

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cold, so cold: yes, and thin and colourless; not like you, Mimi."

"And the English milord—will you give him to me for my husband?" asked Mimi, who had implicit faith in the power of her grandmother.

"*Tiens*," laughed Natalie, showing her toothless gums. "*Mia bella*, you run too fast. Say nothing to the grand signor about the 'curé'; they fear priests, these men, and the way to lose a man is to show him a halter. The poor man gives the ring, what matter if the rich man's gold be of another pattern? 'Tis all round and keeps off the sharp corners of life. Come, where are the roses?"

Mimi fetched them from a little, dark cupboard; their sweet bloom had somewhat faded, but, as Natalie remarked, "They would serve their purpose."

That night Mimi, as well as Natalie, waited in the shadow of the fir-trees. Several men and women came out on to the balcony, which

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ran all round the first floor of the hotel, and sipped their coffee, breaking the music of silence with mirthless laughter and pointless wit. Mimi waited a while, and then growing impatient, unheeding of Natalie's restraining hand, darted forward as a man emerged from the hall door. It was not the "English milord," as they called him, but a dark stranger.

"A bouquet, signor, a bouquet?" Mimi cried.

The man was tall and very dark; his thin face bore a weary expression, and his eyes, large and dreamy, seemed to see more of the shadows and outlines of life than its substance.

"A bouquet, signor, a bouquet?" Mimi cried again.

The man stood and looked at her with much the same expression as would have been his had he suddenly been confronted with a masterpiece, a painting so rare as to command

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reverence as well as admiration; then he spoke, and his voice was low and musical.

"You are too beautiful to be a woman, you should be a picture," he said, and then he glanced at the rose she held out to him, and again from the rose to her face. His eyes grew luminous; he appeared to see through her into a life beyond. He took the red rose gently from her hand, and said:

"You offer for sale the blood of the tree, but some day you will give your own." He held the rose reverently, not as most humans grasp flowers, and then he seemed suddenly to remember that it represented a mundane bargain, and he fumbled for his money.

If any one had ever told Mimi that she could refuse money she would have laughed with scorn, but now some new emotion swept through her and money seemed but a low traffic, and hastily, as though ashamed, she said:

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"No, no, signor, the rose is faded; I will not take your money," and before he could reply she darted away and rejoined her grandmother in the shadow of the fir-trees.

The man stood still a minute looking round, vainly searching the shadows for Mimi; then, placing the rose gently in his breast, he walked away, his head bowed; he was out of the world, alone with his thoughts.

"You silly," snapped Natalie, grasping Mimi's arm so that she hurt her, "why did you speak to the man? He looked at your eyes and not at your bosom. He has not dined well; he is not English milord."

"Let us go home," said Mimi, who was shivering, yet no wind had sprung up from without; but she trembled through the new influence felt within.

"Home, and no business done? What ails thee? See, here comes the English grand signor, and by the saints he is looking

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for thee. Run, child, run, and offer your roses."

But Mimi went reluctantly forward, an ugly frown darkening her face.

Thanks to a severe attack of tight-lacing, Lady Blanche had been obliged to retire to her rooms during dinner; and, like a schoolboy playing truant, Dick had sneaked away before, by being put into a loose tea-gown, she had sufficiently recovered to send for him.

"Thank God for that extra entrée," murmured Dick (he was not wont to say grace either before or after meals) as he left the hall door and perceived Mimi advancing from the shadow.

"A bouquet, milord, a bouquet?" Mimi cried.

Dick smiled and twirled his moustache, looking Mimi all over the while as though he were judging a new horse.

"He has dined," Natalie thought to herself with satisfaction.

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Mimi proffered pink and white roses.

"Pretty," remarked Dick; "but, *mia bella*, red is your colour, and I should like it also to be mine. How much for your red roses?"

"They are not for sale," Mimi replied; but why she knew not.

"Umph! only to be given away to poets, I suppose. Don't be furious, dear; I saw you from the window above. Come, I will give you five francs for a red rose."

"No," said Mimi.

"Ten," urged Dick.

For reply Mimi walked to the side of the road farthest away from the fir-trees, and leaning over the low wall which skirted the parapet, emptied the basket holding the red roses into the valley below. Dick followed and laughed; Natalie saw and swore, but she did not leave her hiding-place.

Now that the red roses were out of sight, so faded also Mimi's ill-humour. With a smile of

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roguish triumph she held up the pink and white roses, crying:

“A bouquet, milord, a bouquet?”

“Pink, then,” said Dick, “for that comes nearest to red in colour. Just one, and will you pin it for me so?”

Mimi selected one and laid the others on the wall; then, standing on tiptoe, proceeded to fasten it in his coat. Dick bent his head. His face was close to hers, and throwing his arms round her, he held her close and kissed her lips. Before Mimi's eyes there came again the picture of the steamer and the memory of Pierre's kiss, only now the odour was of wine instead of beer, and she struggled to free herself.

“Mimi! Mimi!” cried Natalie, coming from the shadow, “where are you, child? I have searched for you this hour past.”

Dick released his hold, and quickly thrust into Mimi's hand a ten-franc piece. Mimi's fingers

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closed tightly over the gold; the red roses were gone, she would not refuse this money. Dick took off his hat to Natalie, saying suavely: "Your pretty daughter has sold me a rose. Maybe you grow them. I am interested in roses; may I call and see them growing?"

Natalie's beady black eyes twinkled as she looked at him, and she thrust her tongue into a toothless gap, giving her face a diabolical expression as she answered: "No, we don't grow roses; but we sell 'em—and—and other things."

"I will call," said Dick.

"Milord, we shall be honoured. We live——"

"*Grand'mère*," interrupted Mimi, who had been looking down the road, "*grand'mère*, here comes Pierre."

"Where?" snapped Natalie.

"There," said Mimi, pointing to Pierre, who, with rather unsteady gait, was slouching towards them.

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Dick felt and looked annoyed. He was not anxious to make the acquaintance of any male members of the family. Natalie, who noted everything, saw at once his face darken.

"Go and meet your cousin, Mimi. I will join you directly," she said; then whispered to Dick. He nodded his head.

"Yes, yes," he said; and hurriedly slipping some loose silver into her hand, which, of course by chance, was half held out, he turned and rapidly entered the Hôtel Florence.

"Would have been gold if he'd had more time," Natalie muttered, as she glanced at what he had given her before slipping it into her bosom.

"What do you want?" she asked Pierre angrily as she joined the two.

Pierre had been drinking; not enough, in his opinion, but more than a little, and his manner was animated.

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"I've had luck," he cried. "I've saved fifteen louis—fifteen louis—and I've come to marry Mimi."

Fifteen louis! Not a small sum to an Italian peasant. Fifteen louis! Pierre should not be despised. Fifteen louis! Natalie's manner changed.

"Good boy," she spoke in Italian, and her voice was low and purring as she patted his arm. "Good boy; but you cannot marry Mimi to-night. Why did you not send word? It is late. How will you return to San Mamette?"

"I shall stay in Lugano to-night and see the curé to-morrow. But Mimi, she only laughs, and I love her," Pierre hiccuped.

"Yes, yes," cooed Natalie. "Mimi, you vixen, be civil to your cousin."

Pierre put out his arms to embrace Mimi, but he slipped on one side and fell against the wall. His antics amused Mimi. She thought

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a tipsy man almost as funny as a dog fight, but not quite so exciting. Pierre brushed the dust from his coat. "'Tis true I love thee," he cried, "but I'll not be fooled. I've saved the money, and I'll marry thee; but I'll not be fooled, no, I'll not be fooled. 'Not good enough,' grandmother said some time back, 'not good enough;' but I've saved the money, and I'll make more. Thy love or thy life is what I'll have."

Pierre looked so fierce as he said this that Mimi drew still farther away; but she did not cease laughing. Pierre's legs were shaky; she knew he could not run after her—she had seen him walk.

Natalie, anxious to make peace, took Pierre's arm, and drawing it through her own, beckoned to Mimi, saying:

"Come, *chérie*, and give Pierre thy arm; he is but overjoyed to see thee. Don't heed the minx, Pierre; she only laughs to tease thee,

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she loves thee well enough. Stay with us to-night; a little straw and a blanket, and sound enough thou'lt sleep, I'll wager."

Mimi came nearer and took Pierre's other arm.

"One kiss," he cried, "only one," and quickly he kissed Mimi's cheek; it was her second kiss that night. Mimi really longed for kisses, but she wanted also to be in love with the giver. The man with the dark, dreamy eyes had not tried to kiss her; she was glad, and yet just a little sorry.

Down the hill the three struggled. Pierre was somewhat difficult to guide over the hard cobble stones—so steep indeed was the hill that rough steps had been cut, forming a path more like a broad stairway than a road. When they gained the market-place all the stalls had vanished, and the shopkeepers under the arches gossiped in groups at doorways, or sat at little tables outside a café.

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"A little wine would go down well," remarked Pierre. "Besides, they must drink Mimi's health."

He tried to withdraw his arm from Natalie so as to reach his pocket, but she gripped him still more firmly as she said:

"All right, my son, I'll pay."

"You got money?" gasped Pierre in surprise.

"I've sold a few flowers to-night," Natalie replied.

"Where did you steal 'em from, mother?" he asked. "Were they wax, and did you take them from the chapel?"

"Wicked boy," replied Natalie, playfully pinching his arm. "They were given me for doing a little work."

"Work? you work?" Pierre continued with drunken bluntness. "Holy Mary, what's come to the earth that you work? Ha! ha! ha!"

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Mimi either found his laughter contagious, or her thoughts gave cause for merriment, for she laughed also.

Natalie tried to speak merrily, but there was an ugly glint in her eyes as she said: "Not a drop shall either of you have if you laugh at your old grandmother. Here are chairs; not a step farther can I go."

They seated themselves at a small beer-stained table, and Natalie ordered a flask of Italian wine. Mimi looked at her grandmother through half-closed eyes. What was her game? Pierre had already had more than sufficient, and why pay when he had money? For Natalie had paid immediately the wine was brought; also, she filled Pierre's glass to the brim, while her own and Mimi's had but half-measure. Pierre, eager to drink, did not notice the difference, but eagerly seizing his glass, raised it to his lips, and with a leer at Mimi he said: "*Mia bella*, I drink to our marriage."

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"Drink, Mimi, drink," cried Natalie.

But to-night Mimi seemed full of varying moods. She raised her glass and looked at it; the wine appeared to change to a red, red rose. Back on the dirty table she placed the glass.

"Drink, Mimi, drink!" cried Natalie, and there was anger in her voice.

The rose faded: Mimi felt again the hot breath of the lustful Dick. For a moment the thought crossed her mind that perhaps Natalie was playing her false, and really meant to marry her to Pierre for the sake of his paltry sum of money; it seemed paltry to Mimi now, with the prospect of the English lord looming in the distance. With flashing eyes and fierce gesture she flung her glass to the ground; crash it fell upon the hard stones.

Pierre half sprung from his chair, but Natalie with strong hands forced him back.

"Peace, children, peace!" she cried in a low voice. "Is it in gaol ye want to spend the

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night? Another glass, garçon; it is only a little accident." The waiter placed another on the table, and Natalie hissed to Mimi, "You will drink to your marriage, or to any other toast Pierre wishes, or give me the gold coin you have hidden in your bosom."

So Natalie guessed even that Mimi had money; but she could play her game also if Natalie betrayed, so tossing her head petulantly, she exclaimed:

"I only did it to tease Pierre; he might think me too easily won."

But Pierre, although somewhat mollified, grew suspicious.

"How came you with the gold?" he asked.

"Ah!" sighed Natalie sweetly, as though protecting a secret. "You must not ask too many questions, my son. Gold sometimes comes to industrious girls as well as to good boys; but Mimi will have little dowry except her good looks."

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"Good looks?" quoth Pierre. "Good looks be damned! Pretty! that's what she is, and I'll knife any one who says she ain't."

He finished his wine with a gulp, and seemed to have forgotten to propose the toast a second time.

Without waiting for more argument, Natalie rose and pushed away her chair, observing, "It must be near midnight: time we were all in bed and asleep."

"Sleep?" echoed Pierre in a thick voice. "Don't want sleep—wine to-night, Mimi to-morrow. Mimi, I love you."

Natalie took one arm and motioned to Mimi to take the other. Pierre sought to embrace her again, but the wine had mounted to his head, and he seemed tipsy all over, instead of only in his legs as hitherto. Mimi dodged the kiss and pinioned his arm. Fortunately, the journey from the café to the rooms they called home was not a long one, for Pierre had

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become somewhat of a burden. He leaned all his might on the two women, pressing the more heavily towards Mimi, imagining in his maudlin way that he showed his affection by so doing.

CHAPTER V.

NATALIE rented two rooms on the third floor of a very old house on the right side of a square courtyard, and it was with difficulty she and Mimi got Pierre up the evil-smelling staircase. The stairs being used by all the tenants alike, no one felt it his or her particular duty to clean them, and they remained year in and year out in the same state of filth. After slipping on the refuse for the fifth time, Pierre stood still and swore. "So you work hard, eh? Might scrape these cursed steps," he snarled.

"'Tis the fowls," said Natalie, straightening her back and groping for the door; "they run wild over the stairs."

"Ha! ha!" laughed Pierre, who evidently thought he had found a joke. "You're a funny

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old hen, you are, ain't you? and Mimi, she's a nice plump chicken; and what am I?—Mimi, what am I? By heaven! I'll crow to-morrow."

Natalie opened the door; Mimi groped for the matches, and having found them, lighted a candle and a lamp; the latter had not been trimmed—the shade smoked, the flame ran up, crack went the glass, and Mimi hastily blew out the flame. Pierre, who now sprawled on a chair, laughed at the accident and conceived another joke.

"*Grand'mère*," he chuckled, "you take the candle and go to bed. The chicken and I don't mind the dark. I can crow without a light. Mimi, come and kiss me, and send the old hen away."

Mimi stood at a little distance surveying him with interest: he was not ugly. Had he been sober, she might have liked him a little. It was a new sensation having a man in their rooms for the night. She watched Natalie spread

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some straw on the ground and cover it with an old rug. The straw had once filled a tattered mattress; the rags had fallen from it, but the straw remained in a corner. Natalie had never thought of having it cleared away, although a neighbour had once begged it for a pig-sty; now it served as a litter for a human swine.

"Go to bed, Mimi," said Natalie, nodding her head in the direction of the door which divided the two rooms; but Mimi was not in a hurry.

Pierre noted her reluctance and beamed. "Chicken don't want to go," he cried. "Let her stay, mother. What odds if the curé be a day late?"

"Go to bed, you vixen!" snapped Natalie; and Mimi, without more ado, left the room. But she had to leave the candle behind her—they had only one—and Mimi did not like the dark. Seating herself on the side of the wooded bedstead, she looked at the window;

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the panes of glass were too opaque with dirt to allow much light to filter through, and Mimi grew more frightened as she thought she heard a rat gnawing the wainscoting. Then she espied a tiny speck of light on the wall over the bed; it evidently came from a crack in the partition. Quick as lightning, Mimi mounted the bed, and by putting her little finger into the hole found she could make it a shade larger; her eye followed her finger, and to her delight she found she could command a good view of the other room. Curiosity banished fear, and Mimi stood on tiptoe. Pierre still slouched on the chair, and Natalie, laying a blanket at the side of the rug, evidently intended to serve as a coverlet, went over to his side. By using her eye and ear alternately, Mimi could both see and hear. Pierre asked for more drink, and to her surprise, Natalie, instead of refusing, opened a cupboard in the wall, and taking out a bottle, the contents of which had the appear-

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ance of brandy, poured some into a cup, and without adding any water gave it to Pierre. He swallowed it, blinked his eyes, gulped, and asked for more. Natalie complied with his wish, but this time added a little water that stood in a jug near. Pierre was now rapidly losing consciousness, and Natalie half-led, half-carried him from the chair to the bed she had prepared. He sank to the ground heavily, nearly dragging the old woman down with him. Would she leave him now? Mimi felt half inclined to step down from her place of 'vantage; however, curiosity prevailed, and she remained.

Would Natalie undress Pierre? Mimi hoped so. Her cheeks burned and her eyes danced. Natalie, however, was old, and experience had gratified curiosity long ago; she only loosened his collar, and then stood and watched him. Soon Mimi heard the sound of snoring: Pierre had fallen into a deep, drunken sleep, and

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lay on the straw with utter abandon. Still, Natalie did not leave him, but kneeling on the floor, watched his face; then shielding the light from his eyes by a chair back, she began with light, deft fingers to examine the contents of his pockets.

So this was Natalie's game—theft! Mimi, used to trickery from her childhood, thought no harm of robbing a defenceless man. "Shouldn't have got drunk!" was all she muttered when Natalie drew forth a faded red silk purse.

Pierre's snoring accompanied the tinkling of the gold as fifteen louis were counted. He had not lied: the money was all there, and putting it back into the purse, Natalie deposited it in her corsage; then carefully shading the light, she proceeded to remove the bottle and cup, and when the cupboard in the wall was closed it was not noticeable, being in the form of a little panel. Still carrying the candle, Natalie left

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the room, but before she did so Mimi slipped down from her spy-hole, and with her clothes on got into bed.

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In the morning Pierre awoke with a bad headache and by no means a sense of well-being. He arose from his straw bed, his limbs ached and he shivered, but nevertheless his first thought was of Mimi, and he determined he would go out and buy her a trinket and see the priest before she should awake. Seizing the jug, he eagerly drained the little water therein; his mouth tasted as though he had been sucking ten-centime pieces all night, and his throat was parched and ached; he had, besides, a soreness in his stomach; he had never felt like it before on similar occasions. The pain was doubtless caused by the neat spirit he had consumed, respecting which his memory was dim, and so he cursed the straw he had been lying on. However,

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after drinking the water, he felt somewhat refreshed, and plunged his hand into his pocket for his purse, but to his horror, it was not there! In vain he searched all his pockets—no purse was to be found. For a moment he was dazed and speechless, then his frantic calls brought Natalie and Mimi out from the inner room. They eagerly inquired what ailed him, and were much surprised at his loss.

“But I had it,” said Pierre, “I had it when I came here.”

“No! no!” answered Natalie, “that is impossible; no one could get in and rob you. See, the door is safe and the window too high up. When did you see it last? You must have dropped it on the road.”

“Didn’t we stop at a café?” asked Pierre. “I must have had it then.”

“’Tis true we had a bottle, but I paid; not a sight of your money have we seen. Maybe

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you only dreamed you saved it," and Natalie sniffed superciliously.

Pierre waxed furious. Mimi thought how clever Natalie had been to have paid for the drink. Pierre bit his under-lip and with puckered brow silently pondered, looking again through all his pockets; then he remembered the reason of his journey and the wedding that was to have been. With tears in his eyes he appealed to Mimi.

"You'll marry me just the same, won't you, dear?—and I'll work harder and save more."

Pierre's voice was pathetic, but Mimi shrugged her shoulders, and with a smile not nice to see, left the room.

Natalie opened the outer door, and pointing to the staircase, said, "Mimi shan't marry a drunken pauper. Go back to your work and mend your ways."

So Natalie and Mimi triumphed.

CHAPTER VI.

THE Lady Blanche was certainly very ill. Determined at fifty to possess the figure of twenty-five, she hoped to obtain such a marvel without sacrifice. Appetite and corsets were constantly at variance with each other, and the result: attacks of more or less violent indigestion, called by courtesy weakness. To look at Lady Blanche when convalescent and hint at weakness was not unfunny. Illness for Lady Blanche meant freedom for Dick. At such times a husband was useful. Sir James would read aloud and never notice if her "transformation" was on her head or the dressing-table, and the ungainly looseness of her released figure made him pitiful rather than critical. A husband for illness and a

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lover in health is the maxim of the average Society woman.

Freedom for Dick meant cards and love (?); he made money by the former, and intended to buy the latter. Mimi he saw almost daily, but rarely alone, and then only for a few minutes. Natalie always appeared at what he considered inopportune moments, and the more his wishes were frustrated the greater became his passion, until to obtain entire possession of Mimi became the sole aim of his existence. But how?

Mimi coquetted with him, her eyes told tales of her imagination, and not, as he supposed, of her heart. She liked him, yes; for was he not rich and great? The sensuality of his nature appealed to her; the something in his manner different to the men of her station touched her vanity; she longed for an adventure without the chaperonage of her grandmother; being kept

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apart whetted her appetite. But feeling convinced that Natalie would know best how to play the game, she obeyed all her orders; an easy matter, since she was not in love.

At length, after sundry hints from Natalie, Dick realised that she, not Mimi, must be reckoned with. The idea did not shock him; in fact, he felt both amused and relieved. A purely moneyed bargain was so outside the range of conscience, and to attain this object without matrimonial complications seemed to combine satisfaction with common-sense. So Dick agreed to meet Natalie alone and arrange terms. The beauty of the girl made no excuse for or lessened the bestiality of the bargain, when Natalie, spawn of hell, sold to Dick, who was of the earth earthy, the body of Mimi;—not her soul, for that is in one's own keeping, and may not be a subject of barter and exchange among others, for as yet Mimi's soul had not been awakened. The price was

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high: Natalie played for a big stake; Dick was almost penniless, but did not say so; he hoped by fair means or foul to obtain the money. Natalie's greed of gold did not outweigh his greed of lust. Natalie was clever, she knew both man's and woman's world: they differ, but they meet at points.

They sat in a third-rate café, this ill-assorted pair. Dick ordered a flask of wine, and the scarlet sin they discussed matched well in hue the ruby liquor they drank. Natalie's eyes sparkled at the fire in the man's veins; with deft allusion and hints of beauties imagined but hitherto unseen, she fanned the flame that rose high seeking to devour Mimi. She even felt a momentary jealousy of the girl she sold. Why had her own youth gone? Why must she offer another? Time had been when she could have won all for herself. Age was a curse; but if youth must fall, then should it help the aged by its falling.

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Dick was for immediate possession, but Natalie lacked nothing in craft and cunning. The money must be paid first to her—all of it, and in bright golden coins. There was also another condition: Mimi must be taken away out of Lugano; in fact, out of Italy. Natalie had no wish to suffer for her sins. She preferred to spend the remainder of her life peacefully in or near Lugano, and there were neighbours who might make life unpleasant for her; for, of course, in time “Milord” would tire, and Mimi might prove revengeful, when she understood. Also, there was Pierre to reckon with, and a man in love might succeed in unravelling secrets; at any rate, he was certain to try, and Mimi’s absence could be more easily lied about than her presence under altered conditions. Southerners might be more lax in their morals than those of the North, but there were limits, and “Milord” was English!

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Natalie was firm; she named the conditions, but not all the reasons, and Dick agreed. Two words only occupied his thoughts, two words only ruled his world—Mimi! and money! He gulped down more wine; Mimi seemed quite near him, and money, great golden coins, were plentiful as the grains of sand on the shore, the pebbles in the street; he would have both, and soon. Calling for the bill, Dick paid it, and giving Natalie a twenty-franc piece for luck, he strode quickly out of the café, leaving her at the table. He guessed, and guessed rightly, that until the money was paid Mimi would be guarded more than ever—therefore, money!

When he reached the Hôtel Florence, the men were still in the smoking-room; a few played cards, others gossiped over their cigars and told stories, the attraction lying in the fact that they were not fit to be related; every one consumes a certain amount of filth

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during their lifetime, some prefer to take it through their ears. Dick ran his eyes round the room and selecting a man, who by his appearance could be easily judged as a very new American millionaire, without waiting to hear him speak and at once proclaim the fact, walked to his side. Dick happened to be the only sprig off a pedigree-tree staying at the Florence, and as he had not put in an appearance after dinner, the Yank had not played, preferring to lose to an earl rather than win from a merchant; so instead of touching the cards, he had bored those nearest him by relating how great a city was New York, and whose "pile" was the biggest—topics of which he never tired, but which interested his hearers not at all. Dick at once challenged him to play, and proposed high stakes; the Yankee was charmed, and Dick, with a fervent prayer to the patron saint of sinners, seated himself at a table in a quiet corner. The proverbial

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bay-tree flourishing of wickedness was his: he won, won, won. The American lost with good grace, and Dick strove to hide his satisfaction; but in his ears a voice appeared to sing again and again, "Mimi is yours, Mimi is yours." He seemed to watch himself play as though he were but the machine, and another hand did the steering; he had prayed to the Devil, and the Devil played his cards. The excitement of a fight never remains in obscurity, intensity floods the air as a wave of emotion may swamp a mind; men drew near and watched. Even an American millionaire may grow tired of doubling stakes and losing, though his partner be a man of so exalted a rank as Dick. At length he cried:

"I guess you have the Devil's own luck," and threw down his cards.

Another man was willing to try and break Dick's run of luck, and a fresh pack of cards was procured. Dick could not have cheated,

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even had he wished, so many eyes watched his every movement. He and his new opponent played with, however, the same result, and the American was pleased when he found that his successor had to give in before he had lost so large a sum. Next to priding himself on spending more, the American liked to remember that he could lose a greater amount than any man present. No one else wished to play, and so the game of chance ended, and Dick went to bed with the same voice singing in his ears:

“Mimi is yours, Mimi is yours.”

.

In the morning more luck came to him in the form of a letter from England. It was sent by a maiden aunt who lived in a state of sanctimonious solitude at Salisbury. The letter urged him to return at once to England and thus escape from the baleful influence of foreign parts (she hated Lady Blanche), and

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start afresh, this time choosing a Parliamentary career. Aunt Mary had great faith in the settling influence of politics. There were two enclosures—one a banker's draft for a hundred pounds, the other a tract on repentance. The latter quickly found a resting-place in the waste-paper basket. But the money? This, with his card winnings, would suffice for all needs for the present, and of the future he never thought; he had won his desire—Mimi!

Life seemed like one long draught of champagne; the Southern air had warmed his blood and made him, so he told himself, a fitting mate for a Southern bride; yes, a bride in all senses of the word except that of a binding bargain. Not for years had Dick been so thoroughly roused. He felt that for him this would be the last great gratification of lust it would be his luck to have; for he had lived early and lived much and loved not at

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all. Neither did he deceive himself with the idea that he loved now; he was old enough and sinful enough to analyse his sensations even as he gloated over them, and he knew this flame would die. But he did not pause to think of what Mimi's future was likely to be; he was at heart a gambler with both life and money, so he made the preparations necessary to satisfy his greed. With the heart of a libertine he possessed the craft of a knave. No romance capable of daylight ever had been or ever could be his; he would hide the traces of the slaying of a soul as carefully as he would have removed the bloodstains from his fingers, had Fate destined him to be a murderer of the body. So he bought a few flowers—not expensive ones; he never spent much money on pleasures in which he did not participate—and sending them to Lady Blanche by her maid, asked if she could possibly receive him. In reply, the maid brought a little note; it

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smelt of patchouli (called by another and more romantic name), was mauve in colour, with Blanche written in silver in one corner. Would darling Dick come to her after lunch? James was going out; she wanted some shopping done, and only the dear old stupid could do it, and then Dick and she would be all alone, etc., etc., etc. Dick's lips curled contemptuously; he knew that half-hour alone together—he could smell her make-up as he thought of it. How tired he was of tea-gowns and brilliantine, patchouli and petting! There was better sport ahead, something to take, something to possess, something to kill; and what matter if that something was honour? Let it, like conscience, die! Dick read Aunt Mary's letter through a second time. Yes, it would serve; he would show it to Lady Blanche, and say he was going back to England. So he would some day—but first, France! There would be no need to mention

Torn Lace

the hundred pounds, his Aunt Mary merely said enclosure. Dick looked in the waste-paper basket; yes, of course, the tract would represent the enclosure, and perhaps after Lady Blanche had ceased to snivel at the thought of parting, she would be willing to give—no, no; *lend* a little. So Dick made his preparation for departure, and sent a short unsigned note to Natalie. Mimi might have some small preparations to make, she probably had not many frocks to pack, and Dick licked his lips and half closed his eyes, but it was not of Mimi's clothing he was thinking.

CHAPTER VII.

It was night. Mimi had gone, and Natalie sat alone; the broken lamp had not been mended, therefore only one candle illuminated the dirty room. Natalie had been drinking, an empty glass and an almost empty bottle, coupled with the nauseating smell of brandy, testified to the fact; but indeed her own dishevelled appearance needed no other witness. Her gay shawl lay on the floor instead of on her head, her eyes were more wild than cunning, and a deep flush tinged her wrinkled cheeks. She was alone, but not lonely, for had she not a pile of gold to play with—to count over and over again, and spread in little heaps or make patterns with across the rickety table? As much gold had been hers

Torn Lace

before—ay, treble and quadruple the amount—but that was long ago. Now age eagerly counted that which youth had valued lightly; for when all other passions die, the greed of gold remains the one supreme sensation of old age. The price paid for Mimi meant squalid luxury for Natalie—more to drink, more to eat, and no work. It is true she could no longer count on Mimi's earnings, but in any case they would have ceased. Mimi had no liking for labour; and if she had continued, then a husband would have claimed the profits, and Natalie's livelihood been a subject for speculation. It was better, far better, to have the gold now and live as long as it lasted—and then? Natalie took another drink; her thoughts had reached the end of an agreeable tether—it was useless to peep beyond.

And what of Mimi? She had gone away happy enough; adoration, adventure, pretty

Torn Lace

frocks, all would be hers. Possessing youth, she thought more of what gold would buy than of gold itself. In some small matters she had been disappointed; for instance, she pouted because Natalie had taken her to the station thickly veiled and there delivered her to Dick. She would have preferred a fine carriage and all the neighbours to see; but Natalie had had a private interview with Dick earlier in the day and respected his wishes; they strongly coincided with her own. And now, where were they? Safely locked in a cosy railway carriage. Natalie smoothed her tattered gown. She almost fancied she was feeling the softness of the cushions; and the colour, how the pale delicate shade of fawn would show off Mimi's black hair! Yes, and her cloak—the beautiful scarlet silk dust-cloak which Dick had hurriedly purchased at the best shop in Lugano; it was a model from Paris, and the colour as rich

Torn Lace

as the texture. "She will be wise," muttered Natalie, "if she wears that and nothing else." Her beady eyes half closed, and she, like Dick, moistened her lips; yet her thoughts were not of Mimi's clothing.

There came an interruption to Natalie's thoughts, one unexpected and unwelcome, a loud knocking at the door. Natalie sat up frightened and trembling. Surely it could not be that Mimi had returned? No, impossible! The gendarmes? they did not know, and probably would not have troubled if they had. Who was an Italian peasant girl to worry about? At any rate, whoever it was, the gold must not be seen. Natalie was sober enough to guard that. Hastily with trembling fingers she gathered the coins together. As many as possible went into the red silk purse (taken from Pierre not long since), and the rest, tied in a handkerchief, followed the purse inside her loose bodice. The gold was heavy,

Torn Lace

and it lay, a little load, on her chest, but not an unpleasant burden; it was good to feel her possessions as well as to remember. Still the knocking continued, and a voice very like Pierre's bade her open. She was not afraid of Pierre, and would have backed her craft against his strength any day. Perhaps he was drunk again and brought more money; she chuckled to herself as she opened the door. It was Pierre, hatless and with flushed face, but this time with haste not wine. "Where is Mimi?" he asked almost before he entered the room.

"Where should she be?" Natalie replied.

"She should be here," Pierre rejoined hotly, "but she isn't."

"How do you know?" asked Natalie, seating herself by the table. She had omitted to remove the brandy bottle, and her eyes sought it greedily. The French have a proverb, "L'appétit vient en mangeant," and it is the

Torn Lace

same with drink. Natalie poured herself out some and motioned for Pierre to fetch another glass, but Pierre took no notice of the invitation.

"Where is Mimi?" he asked again, coming nearer to Natalie.

"Mimi isn't here," she replied doggedly. "What business is it of yours?"

"This: I love Mimi. I told you I wouldn't be fooled, and I won't. I heard a rumour in San Mamette that Mimi was being run after by *un Cochon d'Anglais* from the big hotel, and I came here to-night to see if it spelt truth. On my way I met Donna Nuro."

"And what did the cat say?" snarled Natalie.

"Say!" shouted Pierre. "She said that Mimi had gone with the devil, and you had sold her."

"The woman lies. She is mad. Her husband died, and she would not sell her

Torn Lace

roses, so I took 'em—'A bouquet, milord, a bouquet!' Ha, ha, ha!"

Natalie mimicked Mimi's voice, and ended with a peal of gruesome laughter. She was not used to spirits, usually drinking cheap native wine; but this was in her opinion a festal night, and the brandy sharpened her sense of humour but dulled her reason.

"Cease croaking, you old hag, and tell me the truth. You're drunk, but not too drunk to speak."

"And who was drunk when last they called? And who boasted of money and had none—who? Why, pretty Pierre, the clown who wanted to marry Mimi. So I'm an old hen, am I?" Natalie's laugh turned to a snarl.

"Where is Mimi?" Pierre's voice was full of quiet determination.

Natalie began to muse and vacantly laughed.

"Where is she? and what is she doing?" again demanded Pierre.

Torn Lace

Natalie's wicked eyes twinkled, and she put her tongue into her toothless gap and then replied:

"I should say she is pretty comfortable by now. And what is she doing? Oh fie! naughty Pierre, you mustn't ask; but I would give five—no, ten—francs to see. Oh, la, la, the thought makes me feel young again. Pierre, you're a pretty boy, and I'm not so very old. Drink, boy, drink in a man's stomach takes years off a woman's face."

"Damn you!" growled Pierre between his teeth. "If you don't tell me at once where Mimi is, I'll cut your cursed throat."

There was a fierce light in Pierre's eyes, and Natalie felt a slight tinge of fear as he made a movement towards her. Putting on an air of offended respectability, and speaking in mincing tones, she replied: "Mimi? Why, Mimi's gone to the Donna Teresa as maid."

"The Donna Teresa left Lugano a month

Torn Lace

ago, and went to live at Milan." Pierre's anger seemed to have somewhat abated, and his voice was low, but his face strangely white.

"Yes," answered Natalie, nodding her head, "yes, and Mimi has gone to her at Milan."

"Alone?" asked Pierre.

"Oh no, not alone." Again Natalie laughed at her thoughts. "Oh no, certainly not alone—with—with Pauline; they went to-day."

"You lie!" hissed Pierre. "The Donna Teresa died last week, and Pauline spent to-day at San Mamette. Why do you lie? Tell me the truth!"

"I won't be bullied by you, Pierre. You go home; you know so much about everything and everybody. If you want Mimi, hunt about and find her. Perhaps she's in the next room, perhaps she's not." And Natalie drank the last of the brandy.

Pierre walked to the next room. He felt convinced that Mimi was not there, but she

Torn Lace

might have left some trace behind. With cold determination, which is perhaps the deadliest mood for a man mad with anger, he opened the door, and taking a match from his pocket, struck it on the dirty wall and looked around. Confusion everywhere. All Mimi's small belongings had been overhauled and discarded as not good enough to take away; they lay on the floor, a small, tawdry heap—two dirty chemisettes, a torn mantilla, a faded rose, a small embroidered shawl, a string of glass beads, a few other articles of wearing apparel, and, lying apart from the rest, a piece of a frill of delicate white lace. Pierre struck another match. It was in his heart to weep over Mimi's poor belongings, but the wild anger in his brain burned the tears ere they formed in his eyes. Leaving all the other things where they lay, he stooped and picked up the frill of lace. It was so white, so dainty, so unlike Mimi's past; was it but an evil emblem of her future?

Torn Lace

Such possibilities of beauty, but so torn !

The match went out, he returned to Natalie. Though Natalie had only been alone for a few seconds, her thoughts had wandered from Pierre and Mimi to the money—the precious gold lying so snugly in her bosom, if only she might count it again ! Her fingers itched to spread its yellow beauty over the table. How long would Pierre be ? Her hand rose to her breast, one little touch she must have just to satisfy herself of its safety ; but before she had time to reach the handkerchief holding the gold, she heard Pierre returning, and hastily her hand fell on the table, which she strummed with nervous fingers, humming to herself a café chantant song. But one tiny end of the crimson purse had been disturbed, and like a spot of blood showed itself between the fastenings of her corsage.

Pierre returned, and going up to Natalie—held close to her eyes the torn frill and asked,

Torn Lace

"What is this? and how came Mimi with lace? Only great ladies or those of the *demi-monde* have lace so fine?"

Natalie snatched the frill from his hand and laughed, and laughed.

Pierre let her laugh on, and when she was tired, said quietly:

"What is your answer?"

"You fool, and worse than fool," Natalie cried. "'Tis but a rag the minx stole from the laundry. I found her tying it round her leg—such a pretty leg, Pierre; so plump and——"

But Pierre's hand was on her mouth. Natalie pushed his hand away, her pleasantries giving place to violent temper.

"Go away!" she shrieked, "go away! You've been here too long, with your ferreting questions. Mimi was never made for a low black-guard of a waiter like you. You want the truth? Well, Mimi's gone, and you go too. Go! d'ye hear? d'ye hear?"

Torn Lace

But Pierre did not answer. The veins on his forehead stood out like cords, his nostrils quivered, he stood as one hypnotised, his gaze fixed on the red spot in Natalie's corsage. In her anger she had risen from the chair, and the sudden movement had opened her bodice, and a small red tassel was visible. Not a word said Pierre; but Natalie, mindful of the gold, did not like the fixed gaze of his eyes. She imagined, in her drunken condition, that he saw through her bodice and had discovered the gold. She could not disguise her fear; it was too real, for it touched that which she prized most. A quick movement, and both of her hands covered the place where the precious gold lay. For a moment the thought of Mimi, and fear for her safety, left Pierre's mind; he only saw with his memory's eye the red tassel—yes, saw it distinctly, though the wrinkled old hands strove to hide it from view. But as a ray of light in one's eyes reproduces itself in the

Torn Lace

dark, so Pierre saw in front and not behind the wrinkled hands the red tassel; and there came instantly to him recollections of that night, now seemingly so long ago, yet but a little while, that dreadful night when last he had crossed the threshold. The climb up the stairs, the straw bed—yes, and that bottle standing on the table, it told him of those last drinks which he had forgotten, but now remembered. Yes, he remembered, and also he understood: the guilty shrinking of Natalie told him much.

“You thief!” he hissed, drawing near her; “you thief! take away your hands, my purse lies behind, my purse with the money for little Mimi. So you fooled us both! Take away your hands, I say!”

Natalie shrank backward until she crouched against the wall, but still her fingers were locked over her bosom; her eyes glittered with anger, but her mouth quivered with fear. She did not think Pierre would really hurt her

Torn Lace

she but feared losing the gold. And Pierre's imagination showed him the red purse, the one his mother had given him long ago when he was a little boy; it had been empty then, but it was her last gift before she died. Yes, a purse of red silk and tassels: there it was behind the fingers of Natalie. The flesh and bone appeared to be transparent—no, they were not fingers at all, but only a network keeping his treasure away from him, a net to be broken. With one quick wrench he caught the fingers and tore them away; Natalie gave one cry, the purse fell to the floor, and as Natalie sank down by it, the kerchief followed, as a shower of gold fell and clattered on the bare floor. For a moment Pierre drew back in astonishment. How came Natalie with so much gold? Natalie gave him one look of intense hatred, then with a snarl more like a wild beast than human being, she began to clutch the coins with eager fingers. Pierre stooped and picked up the purse. Yes,

Torn Lace

it was the one he had lost; it was full, too, of gold. But the other money lying on the floor, was that the price paid for Mimi? Thrusting the recovered purse into his breast, he laid both hands on Natalie's shoulders. "Get up," he said, and his voice sounded to him like the voice of a stranger; there was a singing in his ears, and gold, gold, gold seemed dancing all around him. Natalie tried to shake him off, and still her wrinkled claws scratched the floor for the scattered coins. Then Pierre lifted her bodily, and heedless of her kicks, placed her in a chair. She was somewhat sobered by fear, but her only thought was that he intended to rob her. She realised that he was the stronger of the two, and through her muddled brain there came the idea that she must win by craft. She ceased to kick and summoned a few tears, whining in a plaintive voice:

"'Tis all I have for my old age, Pierre;

Torn Lace

and Mimi gone, and no one to work for me. You've got your purse, Pierre; I only borrowed it for a little joke. Leave me the rest."

"Where did you get it from?" Pierre demanded. Natalie chose to think he referred to the purse, and replied:

"Out of your shirt, Pierre, when you slept. It seemed a pity to waste it on a jade like Mimi: I saved you from that."

But to Pierre the theft of the purse now seemed a small matter compared with the great fear in his heart.

"Where did you get that gold from, and why? Is it the price paid for Mimi?"

Pierre's eyes were fixed now on a single coin lying near: Natalie thought there was greed in his gaze, for to her money seemed so far to outweigh love. A share! yes, that must be what Pierre wanted. She remembered her age and his youth, the lateness of the hour, the tenements empty above and below; she must give if

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she would not have him take—he still looked at the money and not at her.

“The price?” she croaked; “well, and what then? Mimi is a pretty wench, and it’s not too much. But I am old and cannot work, you would not rob me, Pierre, would you? not rob your old grandmother. Is it a share you want?”

Pierre gripped her shoulder with one hand as he stood beside her, but still he gazed at the floor. Natalie thought he looked at the money, but instead he saw a picture of Mimi: the gold coin covered a door, a door leading to a bottomless pit; down this she had fallen, down, down, down beneath the heel of a man, through the avarice of a woman. Thought and imagination ran riot in his brain, only two definite ideas grew out of the blood-red mist: he must hunt down the man and kill the woman! Still the monotony of the croaking voice continued: “I’ll give you some, Pierre—

Torn Lace

yes, but not much; I am so old and feeble. How much, Pierre? Two—no, three louis. But take away your hand, it burns me.”

“Burns you?” Pierre lifted his head, and his eyes flashed into hers. “Burns you? *Mon Dieu!* Hell itself is not enough to burn you! You’ve sold her, sold little Mimi, your own flesh and blood!”

“Four louis, no five, isn’t it enough?”

“No,” said Pierre, “not enough,” and he laughed.

“Ten,” urged Natalie. “Ten; only go away now, and [cunningly] I’ll pay you in the morning.”

“The morning?” laughed Pierre, “the morning? No, no; I’ll take payment now!”

And from her corset he snatched the coins she had gathered from the floor.

“Now!” he cried: “payment now!” and holding her thin body close to him he rammed the gold into her mouth. Natalie struggled,

Torn Lace

her face grew purple, then livid, her beady eyes seemed starting from her head, she could not scream, only gurgling groans came from her throat, deep down, as the man jammed in the golden coins, until her bosom was empty, her throat full, and her life gone!

Then he threw the body from him as one may a thing unclean, and she lay on the dirty floor, a few coins round her, and others falling from her open mouth. Then Pierre went out into the night.

CHAPTER VIII.

"Faites vos jeux, messieurs ; faites vos jeux."

The calm voice of the croupier sounded, the players made their game, the roulette ball was set in motion.

"Rien ne va plus," again the croupier's voice rang out and all eyes were fixed on the whizzing ball.

"Vingt et un rouge," out came the wooden rakes and gathered most of the money staked into the bank. Still the players kept their seats, eager for the next chance of tempting Fortune; only a few of those standing in the outside ring moved away, amongst them Mimi. Mimi, but not the Mimi of the mountains; rather a Mimi of the valley. Mimi, developed by exotic warmth of sun and passion. Gone the

Torn Lace

airy grace of the wild bracken fern, gone the unkempt slovenliness of the Italian doorstep, gone the girlish glance of curiosity; and in their place the slow, haughty carriage of the courtesan, albeit still in years a girl. High-heeled shoes in place of wooden sabots, and instead of the chemisette and short skirt, a Paquin gown; a golden glory of chiffon, *avec un chapeau de tulle orange*. But chiefly petticoats; the gown held high, nearly to the waist, was but of secondary consideration: Mimi had learned that there are two kinds of women in the world—those who wear petticoats and those who do not! Mimi preferred petticoats: cloudy white ones of *mousseline de soie*, each flounce edged with small golden balls of chenille, representing the wealth of the orange harvest—green leaves, too, wandered over the flounces, and the brown twigs disappeared one wondered where?

On her face as yet no paint hiding nature,

Torn Lace

called attention to the advertising of artifice—for her lips were ruddy and rich as the cacti which blossomed in the Casino gardens; and her eyes, hungry for all the love that was their due, needed no *khol* to heighten their seductiveness.

Mimi was a beauty, such a one as men square their shoulders to see, and having seen, devour with their eyes, while their blood tingles, and desire mounts high to aching point. Mimi could have loved them all; for affection in youth may flow through many channels nor leave the giver dry; because it is not love at all, but the essence of youth, and the forerunner to the greater emotion, which, with the ripeness of passion, will maybe drown itself with the depth of its devotion—thus age is death.

This Mimi knew not; in her as yet only nature called for recognition, while her brain entwined passion and avarice together with

Torn Lace

satisfactory result. But her heart, her soul? It lay hidden away in a recess of her being, a recess to which no one had so far won access. Perhaps long ago a red rose had whispered to her, but she had not understood.

So Mimi turned away from the table when "*Vingt et un rouge*" had been called, and strolled towards the entrance-hall. It was cooler there, and her purse was empty; she had not been winning. It was strange to find herself alone—that is, unprotected. Dick had long ceased to care for her, but still he guarded her well, hating to lose any of the bargain he had paid for. Not having so far lacked money, he had satisfied her dream of splendour, and to her animal appetite had ministered by imaginative suggestion when physical capability became to him a burden.

So a year had passed, and until to-night these two had kept together. England and politics had not claimed Dick; instead, he

Torn Lace

and Mimi had roamed the Continent, cards and supplies from the aunt at Salisbury supplying the funds. Mimi, treading unknown ground, had been tractable; she would stay within second-rate rooms and smoke while Dick dined with relations or friends at a first-class hotel. He was her master, and she, an Italian, kissed the hand that fed her. It was better than selling postcards and eating dried fish, better than feeding the caged birds or smelling the laundry clothes, better to be stared at clad in silks than ogled by the poor attired in rags. And her grandmother? la la, she had forgotten her. Pierre? ugh! she had acquired no taste for beer. So she sat on a divan in the entrance-salon and wondered would Dick be very angry when he returned to their apartments and found that she had for the first time disobeyed orders and come forth alone? Ah, but she had grown tired of the restraint and the loneliness; Dick had been

Torn Lace

absent longer than usual and the night and the rooms called her. She had all an Italian's love of gambling, and it was not often Dick allowed her to play; to-night she had only thirty francs to bring with her and they were gone. Dick paid the bills, Dick kept the money. Mimi carried a square bag of chain gold, but it usually held little save her handkerchief and a powder-puff. The lost money did not trouble her, the risk of rousing Dick's anger failed to frighten her; she was alive, alive and alone, able to catch each amorous glance that approached her. She felt her power; Dick became but a shadow in the background.

On entering she had passed the keepers of the doors unchallenged, played her small hazard with additional gusto because unadvised, and now the scene around became enchanting because she was unguarded. She watched the promenaders with half-closed eyes, she opened her nostrils and

Torn Lace

inhaled the humid scent of the women, the tobacco perfume of the men; it was hot even here, but the heat appealed to her voluptuous nature; the buzz of voices after the silence of the gambling-rooms, the clatter of glasses at the end of the hall, the envious stares of the courtesans, who saw in her a natural rival to their built-up charms, and above all, the homage in the glances of the men, was sweet intoxication. One man especially attracted her, perhaps because he looked at her with such indifference, and his eyes did not glow in response to her burning glance, for she lost the languorous sensuality of half-closed eyes as she looked at him, and mountain fires seemed lit in place of valley dreams. He was tall this man, with a graceful, symmetrical figure, haughty, with knowledge of perfect outline, graceful because of well-proportioned strength; a face of cynical enticement was his—cold eyes, a refined nose, scarlet

Torn Lace

lips, and above his brow a wavy wealth of silver hair. The white crown of age above the lineless profile of youth! It holds a mystery: to Mimi it breathed fascination. This man smoked a cigarette, lazily, as though each puff might consume an hour and yet leave him enough leisure; he regarded Mimi as calmly as though she were but an illustration in a magazine, and then his glance strayed. Mimi felt vexed. Another man seated himself by her side and spoke to her. She did not see him, she did not hear him, but only looked at the silvery-haired stranger lounging against a column near. She rose from her seat and approached him. When quite near he felt her presence, the fire in her gaze compelled his attention. Their eyes met. "Love me," she whispered, in her soft Southern tongue, and laid her hand on his arm. The contact with his sleeve thrilled her; he was merely amused.

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Slowly removing the cigarette from his lips, he regarded her with a steady consideration, his mouth smiling, his eyes seeking information; then he replied to her in her own tongue. "*Mia bella*," he said, "your invitation is all the more charming as I don't believe you paint."

"Paint?" queried Mimi.

"Your face, dear, it seems clean."

Then he glanced casually around, and a frown crossed his face as he noticed that several promenaders had paused to observe them.

"It is oppressively hot, shall we leave?" he asked.

"Yes, yes," Mimi answered eagerly.

The night air struck swiftly sweet with a fillip of keenness after the vitiated atmosphere within; they left the White Casino, and turned into a side-path leading through the gardens; there were seats beneath the palm-trees—the

Torn Lace

man selected a sheltered spot. Mimi devoured him with her eyes, she was glad when the evening breeze wafted a diaphanous frill of her petticoat across his foot, she almost screamed with delight when he took her hand; but still his eyes did not burn, he only regarded her with interest.

"You must be very young," he observed. "Yes, it is neither morphia nor chartreuse, it is youth; how nice. But husband your emotions or your sensations will not last. So you want me to love you?"

"Yes," answered Mimi fervently, while her bosom rose with a strong wave, and her fingers clutched his; her lips were parted, her eyes?—they must have burned the lids that now drooped over them, unable to hold open against the weight of passion that gripped her.

The man regarded her critically, as though the study of emotion, not the personality,

Torn Lace

interested him; and then he observed in slow, measured tones:

“ But I don’t care for women.”

Mimi stared in amazement. That the possibility could arise of her overtures being repulsed, had never occurred to her; also that the man should address her as a sex instead of an unit of desirability, staggered her perception. He still regarded her with an amused smile, he had not withdrawn his hand, he evidently was not angry, merely indifferent. Mimi felt first surprise, then resentment; not shame—had she felt any shame at all, it would have been for him. She withdrew her hand and, rising, stood in front of him. The man lit another cigarette, observing in his slow, musical tones:

“ *Mia bella*, you are disappointed; but don’t be angry, you have held my hand—that was a concession to your beauty.”

Mimi regarded him with burning eyes and

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quivering lips; she almost hated, but she still desired.

"You cannot be a man; what are you?" she asked.

The man felt pleased. A courtesan would have cursed him and gone away, this girl was still interested in him: he liked to analyse himself and be analysed by others, and he replied:

"I am a male egoist: I worship myself, I give a smaller amount of admiration to those who resemble me; but women? They fail to amuse me."

There came a sound of footsteps crunching the gravel, and into the shadowy by-path strolled Dick. He paused astonished when he beheld Mimi; the man was well known to him, and Dick uttered in amazement:

"What, you, Vincent?"

"How do?" said the man, without rising.

Mimi regarded Dick with anger and hatred.

Torn Lace

If he had not come, she might have succeeded, and how great would have been the victory.

"Won't you sit down?" drawled the man, indicating with his foot the vacant chair. "The lovely lady prefers to stand and worship me."

"But how did you get to know each other?" Dick asked incredulously.

"Ah!" drawled the man, "knowing my tastes as you do, you may imagine that I was not the first to advance; this beautiful lady honoured me by asking me to love her."

"Mimi!" exclaimed Dick, regarding her savagely. But Mimi took no notice of him, she stood with her head thrown proudly back, as she looked first at one man and then at the other.

"How dare you?" growled Dick, momentarily giving way to anger.

"I don't care for domestic scenes," the man

Torn Lace

observed, rising slowly and gracefully from his chair. "Had I known she was your *bonne amie*, Dick, I would not have permitted her to hold my hand; I granted her that much."

Dick's frown changed to a smile. Mimi stamped her foot and clenched her teeth, she had a vague idea that they were laughing at her.

"Wait a minute," observed Dick to the man; "I am going your way."

"Better than woman's way," the man observed. "This lovely lady is a charming illustration of my theory."

Dick turned to Mimi.

"Of course, after this, you cannot expect me to take you back." He did not add that he had just left a note at their apartments, saying good-bye for ever, and enclosing a paltry hundred-franc note; but continued, "Without me, you would have starved. Now go back

Torn Lace

to the gutter I raised you from, I am well rid of you."

Mimi did not reply. The man, still smiling, bowed low to Mimi, then significantly flicking off the end of his cigarette, he strolled away, Dick by his side.

"Where shall we go?" asked the man. "I am tired of play."

"First, I must call for a note I left by mistake," answered Dick; "and then——"

Mimi watched the retreating men; no word had she said, the eloquence of the courtesan was not yet hers; she stood still, with clenched hands and teeth, sullen and unsatisfied. She had no thought of the future; she did not remember the emptiness of her purse, she was not yet hungry. The band in the Casino gardens ceased to play, and the musicians enjoyed a brief interval; those who did not adjourn to the cafés, strolled about and smoked. A violinist, a boy, came near to Mimi. First she

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smelt the odour of his cigarette, it was more strong than fragrant, but it savoured of Lugano; next she saw his uniform, it was bright of colour and pleased her; and then she met the glance from his eyes turned towards her inquiringly—they were large and dark, full of the South: not cold and satirical as those of the man, nor sensually tired as those of Dick, but warm, luscious, full of love for all women; he was a boy and an Italian. Mimi smiled at him.

CHAPTER IX.

PARIS! how differently this name appeals to various individualities, significant of all that is unholy to the hatchet-faced spinster who has never crossed the Channel, and suggestive of unique, and at the same time not expensive, indecency to the week-end bounder. Paris! palpitating with life, redolent of sunshine, the heaven of artistic men, the hell of *passé* women. The land for food, and the playground of the foolish. To Paris had Mimi drifted, and to drift to a place is different, so very, very different from going there direct, with a purpose. It was winter-time, and even Paris seemed to have lost all its sunshine. Snow had been falling and was quickly changed by the traffic from its white beauty into a dark-hued mire, a bitter wind blew from the east, and

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only those pedestrians were abroad who had business from home, or no home; the vendors of roast chestnuts shivered over their charcoal braziers at the street corners, the muffled-up *cochers* drove into each other with more recklessness and worse language than usual, this form of mutual abuse being the equivalent to a stand-up fight in England.

In Le Boul Mich (situated in the Quartier Latin), or to give it its correct, though rarely-used name—the Boulevard Saint Michel, the sidewalks outside the cafés were deserted, and only a few chairs turned upside down to keep the snow off the seats represented the usual life and gaiety. But although it was only a little after ten o'clock, the Café d'Estelle was not devoid of customers. Gaunt-eyed waiters, looking as if they had spent the night in their shabby black clothes (it is a subject for speculation if waiters ever remove or change their clothing), waited on a few students who re-

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quired late breakfasts (they usually cooked their own), and supplied absinthe soakers with their premier drinks in glasses with sugar and water added, and mopped dirty tables with dirtier serviettes. The air was hot and unwholesome, and steam trickled down the closed windows. Into this café came Mimi, with the same proud carriage as of yore, but unable to obtain a *fiacre* outside her lodgings, she had walked through the snow, and her damp petticoats flapping against her legs had made them cold and uncomfortable; no hat covered her picturesquely-dressed hair, but a bunch of red roses weeping scarlet tears perched coquettishly below the left ear. Her dress was an arrangement of black gauze and scarlet silk, more suggestive of festive night attire than morning, and a cloak of scarlet velvet lined with ermine had served to keep out the piercing wind. She held her dress and cloak high, and the wet, clinging petticoats were of

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white lace, suggestive of the *Bal Bullier* or the *Moulin Rouge*. The volume of absinthe-laden warmth that greeted her seemed a welcome contrast to the outside gloom and cold. She passed to a table in a corner near which a Choubertsky sent forth a good heat.

"*Café noir avec du cognac*," she said to the waiter, to whom she was well known; and kicking off her soaked, high-heeled slippers, held her legs out to the ugly but comforting stove. Two gaily-dressed women who had been warming themselves, moved farther away after wishing her a curt "*Bonjour*." They also presented a dishevelled appearance. They had all danced together at the *Bal Bullier* the night before, and lodged in the same house; but Mimi, unlike most women of her class, refused to fraternise with females of a similar persuasion. Men fascinated her; the friendship of women she had never known: her temper was had and her tongue sharp, and

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woman avoided her. The waiter brought the coffee and poured it into a tall glass standing in a saucer, by its side he placed a decanter of brandy, a rimmed decanter, each rim signifying a portion, by this he could tell how much she had consumed. Mimi took one sip of the steaming coffee, and then filled up the glass with brandy. Two men drinking absinthe and playing dominoes, paused to look at her: there was something about Mimi that distinguished her from other women. She had held out her legs to warm by the stove without first glancing at any of the men present, and when the women had moved away from her, she had shown no resentment at their evidence of dislike. She had not even observed it. She was glad to have the stove to herself; like an animal, she always strove to satisfy each passing appetite, be it for what it may, and circumstances outside that appetite concerned her not. Even the cunning avarice

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of bygone days was no longer hers; removed from Natalie's influence, she was not mercenary, and therefore would never be quite a success. When she smiled at the Italian boy-musician, she had taken her wondrous beauty to the wrong market, and hence her presence at the Café d'Estelle. So when the absinthe-drinkers gazed at Mimi, she, only desiring warmth, and having enough money to pay for her wish, took no notice of them, whereupon they returned to their petty gambling, though the other women did their utmost to attract their attention. At another table three artists were having breakfast. So night and day seem to be always meeting in Paris without the dead hours in between.

"Should have been at the École Julien an hour ago," remarked one bearded disciple of the brush, by name Albert Morris.

"Well, I reckon 'tisin't often we paint the night red, and sleep through the pale tints

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of the morning. Chuck over that bread," answered Goulding, a promising student from Boston.

"There is la belle Mimi—heavens, what a pose! What a pity she won't sit; she is the very woman Ralphe wants," cried a slim, fair, bright-looking youth, so generally called Bob that, except when signing his pictures or writing to his dear old mother who lived in Devonshire, he forgot that he had any other name.

"It's an honour to sit for Ralphe—whoever he paints becomes immortal," observed Morris, lifting two tin pots and helping himself to *café au lait*.

"Why not ask her? I guess she's warmer and feels better fixed by now. Bob, you'd better ask her, you're Ralphe's pet pupil," suggested the American.

"Besides," observed Morris, "you did her a good turn last night. I'll bet the tipsy brute

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has a sore head this morning. You are a champion light-weight, Bob."

"Bosh," said Bob; then added, "she has often refused to sit for me, but for Ralphe—yes, I'll risk a snub for him," and he rose and pushed back his chair. Mimi greeted him with a smile. She had warmed her legs, but her wet shoes still lay soles uppermost near the stove, and her cloak was thrown over another chair back.

"*Bonjour*, Mimi," said Bob cheerfully, drawing up a vacant chair. "Had any breakfast?"

"Too tired to eat," answered Mimi.

"Not been to bed, eh?"

"Well, in a way," Mimi laughed, and shrugged her shoulder, then shivered.

"Have some more hot coffee—here, *garçon*!"

The waiter came, and receiving Bob's order, brought another glass in a saucer and filled it with fragrant coffee; the saucers, like the rims of the decanter, would be counted when

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the reckoning came. Mimi added more brandy; she was not a drunkard, but knew of no other method of banishing cold.

"Enjoy the *bal*?" asked Bob, and then he could have kicked himself for his stupidity, remembering the drunken man he had disposed of.

"Yes, after you took the beast away; but, well, all *bals* are alike, aren't they? Why didn't you come back?"

"Oh, we went to the Café d'Harcourt, and then finished up at the Halles," answered Bob, wondering how he could approach the subject in his mind. Mimi gave him a clue.

"I am tired of the *bals*, tired of Paris, tired of life, sick of everything;" and Mimi's lips curled scornfully as she looked round the café.

"It is morning, dear," said Bob sympathetically. "You are maybe tired of the Paris you know; it is only half. You should try the other."

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"How?" asked Mimi, interested in the mere suggestion that novelty was possible.

"Well, you are too beautiful to be wasted on the *Bal Bullier*, the *Moulin Rouge*, and the cafés. La belle Otéro and Liane de Pougy do not appear to be tired of Paris. You are more beautiful than either; you should be Queen of Paris, not merely reigning beauty of one-half, and that not the best half. Why remain in the Quartier Latin? and why won't you sit? Now, if you would pose for Ralphe—that is, of course, supposing he would have you [Bob knew there was little doubt on that score, but he knew also something of woman's love of conquest]—then your fame would be the envy of all. You would live for ever: that which Ralphe paints never dies." Bob's face glowed with enthusiasm.

Mimi caught something of his animation, but when her eyes sparkled she was not thinking of art, but of jewels. She had seen la belle

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Otéro in her celebrated corsage of diamonds, she had seen Liane de Pougy in her ropes of pearls, and, yes it was true, she, Mimi, was the more beautiful. But the idea of sitting did not sound productive of much excitement; that would probably bore her, and so she observed with a sigh:

"I have been asked so often to sit, and all you artists think you can improve heaven and paint the earth, and what do you offer? Thirty francs a week in the *Écoles* and at most a franc an hour in the studio. Bah! my *concierge* makes as much when we are generous or drunk. And I? Oh, I make much more with less discomfort. To pose for hours undressed, without a fire, not even love to warm you, is not worth the trouble. No; I would like to go back to Italy, but when I am in the mood I have not the money, and when the money comes the mood goes."

"Let me take you to Ralph," urged Bob in

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a quiet, earnest voice. "He will pay you much more; he is generous and just, he would not wish you to lose by him, and he is very rich. Come, say yes. Think of the glory of being Belle of the Salon, Queen of Paris! because you are the most beautiful woman in Paris."

"Why do you ask me? I have refused to sit for you; why ask for Monsieur Ralphe?"

"Because you were right to refuse me; only *he* is worthy to paint you. Oh, Mimi dear, do go to him, just once as a great favour to please me. You need not go again if you dislike him."

Mimi smiled. The coffee and brandy had warmed her; there was unique flattery in Bob's attitude; he spoke of her beauty, not as though it charmed him personally, but as something to which reverence was due. Bob's hands rested on the table as he leaned forward with eager admiration in his gaze, and Mimi laid her hand lightly on his as she replied:

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"You were good to me last night, and did not seek payment. Now you ask a favour, but not for yourself. Yes, I will go."

"Ah!" Bob heaved a big sigh of satisfaction.

"But not with a drove of other models," Mimi continued proudly. "I am *one*, not a crowd; and, *mon Dieu*, if he refuses me, if he thinks others more beautiful than I, then, *mon chéri*, don't speak to me again: I shall hate you."

"When Ralphe paints you—and he will—I shall be too much your inferior for you to trouble to remember me," said Bob almost sadly; then his bright, boyish smile returned as he cried:

"Come, another drink, and then I will take you to him."

"But my frock, I have not changed since the *bal* last night, and I have no hat."

"Come as you are; no hat could look like your wet roses."

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Mimi refused any more drink; she always satisfied her appetite, never gorged or guzzled. If fate had given her a chance, she would have made a charming woman; as it was she lived as a fascinating personality. She failed in some points as a courtesan: a courtesan's appetite should be like her conscience—elastic. Mimi had no banking account. While she was putting on her shoes, Bob rushed across to his friends.

“Victory!” he cried. “I am taking her to Ralphe.”

“He will not be at the *École* to-day,” said Morris.

“No, no, no!—to his private studio I shall take her,” replied the excited Bob.

“What, you will drive across Paris with her in that attire? You are brave,” observed the American.

“Her mood might change with her dress. Can't afford to risk it. Besides, look at the

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effect; Ralphie is an artist!" and Bob rushed back and helped Mimi into her cloak.

When they left the café the snow had ceased to fall, but the cold east wind cut round the corners with a cruel sharpness.

"Ugh!" shivered Mimi.

"Hi, you there," cried Bob to a strolling *fiacre*. He was so excited he spoke in English. The *cocher*, however, understood his gesture and pulled up.

Mimi enjoyed the drive despite the weather. Bob did all he could to interest her, and it was distinctly a change to be talked to like a decent woman.

Mimi was, for the time being, tired of love (?), and during a pause in the conversation she observed:

"You English, yes, you make good friends and gallant comrades; but, la la! such poor lovers. Yet I like you, you are so clean; you seem to wash your souls as well as your bodies.

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Is that why we have to teach you how to love?
Is love unclean?"

"Not real love," said Bob, and changed the subject.

"Look! Mimi," he cried, "what lovely flowers! Are you fond of flowers, dear?"

"Oh yes," said Mimi, and she looked eagerly at the florist's window they were passing; so many beautiful blossoms tied daintily with sashes of pure white tulle as only Parisians know how to tie them.

"*Arrêtez*," cried Bob, and the cab stopped. "I will buy you a little bouquet," he said.

"No, no," protested Mimi. She knew *les étudiants* have as a rule little to spend on flowers, or on anything else for that matter. However, Bob jumped out.

"Well, if you must, then not here; this is so very expensive. Just a bunch of violets at the corner."

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"I will promise not to spend much," said Bob, and entered the shop.

He was not gone long, and when he returned Mimi screamed with delight at the single rose he gave her. It was more beautiful than any she had ever seen—of a rich, deep crimson in colour, perfect in shape, each petal as of moulded velvet, the veins seeming to carry the colour from the heart of the rose; the stem was very long, the leaves of a fragrant green freshness, and even the thorns added harmony to the completeness of the whole.

"You like it?" asked Bob.

Like it! Mimi's eyes seemed to rebuke the question. She did not want to talk any more; the rose appeared to hypnotise her, and Bob watched, his artistic soul drinking in her beauty. She was more lovely than before he had given her the rose, for now a great tenderness came into her face, an illusive mystery

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into her eyes; she was no longer the Mimi of the café.

"Where are you?" asked Bob at last.

"Away in the past," she answered, and her voice seemed sweet with the music of dreams; her eyes were fixed on the rose as she continued:

"There are mountains, and vines, and red, red roses, and the streams trickle down the mountain slopes, and the valleys are sweet with flowers and sleep." Then she raised her eyes and looked at the buildings they were passing, and cried:

"Oh, how ugly man makes the world! Where are we going? The rose tells me that I shall see the mountains soon, and the streams and the vineyards; yes, we are going to the mountains."

"We are going to Ralphe," Bob answered, "and here we are."

They dismissed the *fiacre*, and passed

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through a door leading to a courtyard. Here in spring and summer bloomed many flowers in the quaint urns, and tiny fountains splashed; but now, save for a sprinkling of snow, the urns were empty, and the silver waters no longer sparkled in the sunlight, all was bare and desolate.

In response to Bob's ring, the door was opened by a young Arab picturesquely clothed in his native costume. He smiled at Bob, who was well known to him, he being honoured by Ralphe's friendship as well as his tuition. The Arab spoke in French, and in reply to Bob's inquiries said: "The master is within. If you will go to the studio, I will inquire if he will see you."

To Mimi, the immense hall through which they passed to the studio seemed Fairyland. It was built entirely of white marble. Corinthian pillars supported the domed roof, which, divided into sections, had been painted, in

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scenes taken from Grecian mythology, by artist-friends of Ralphe. Between the pillars stood high tripods of bronze, some holding urns of fragrant flowers, others lamps from which emanated weird green lights; a few carved chairs upholstered in green velvet comprised the furniture. The studio was a large room, also with a high-domed roof, and the walls seemed to be entirely of glass, interlaced with pillars; here and there hung heavy curtains of gobelin blue velvet, in front of which stood beautiful pieces of statuary, while standing on easels were many pictures.

Mimi stood quite still for a moment, and then sprang forward.

"My mountains!" she cried, "my mountains!" and she stood enraptured before a large landscape. Bob had seen the picture before, but now Mimi's rapt attention gave new life to his enthusiasm.

"You will sit for such a man?" he asked.

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"That is my birthplace," said Mimi. "Oh, where is he?—where is the painter?"

"Come, stand on this model's throne. I want him to see you so. He will be here soon," answered Bob.

The throne was opposite the picture. Mimi could stand there and see her beloved mountains; her face was flushed and happy, her bosom rose and fell with quick, intense breathing; she held the red rose with both hands clasped to her breast, and her eyes with brilliant eagerness were fixed on the picture. Bob heard a door near open softly; he turned away from Mimi, and before Ralphe, who had entered, could exclaim, whispered a few words to him. In silence they watched Mimi, and then, without a sound, Ralphe stepped in front of the picture, and met Mimi's intense gaze. She was silent for a few seconds, and then gave a startled cry, for before her she beheld the poet of long ago—the strange prophet to whom

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she had given the red rose. Instinctively she held out her hands to him, offering the rose she now grasped; she felt the power of his dark eyes as of yore, again they seemed to look, not only at her, but through her. With her startled cry had sprung into life her soul, and while Ralphe's eyes still gazed she became conscious of her desecrated body. A wave of shame passed over her; her proud head drooped, her hands fell limply to her sides; the beautiful rose fell too, and as it touched the hard wood of the throne, broke from its stem and lay quite still, waiting to wither and die—alive and yet dead—an emblem of herself.

CHAPTER X.

TIME passed away, and every morning Mimi was to be found at Ralphe's studio, and every day the picture grew. The picture that was to be his masterpiece, and Mimi never thought of the fame that would be hers. Fame? No woman in love craves fame, save for her lover, and even then is half afraid and wholly jealous of it.

With the awakening of Mimi's soul had come the knowledge that life hold's love, that life is love, and that love is a temple with many altars. Passion may burn at one, but passion is not the temple. So poor, uneducated Mimi discovered the greatest truth in the world, and in her ignorant fashion tried to reason it out with herself, and what was

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better, tried to live up to the conclusion she arrived at. Ralphe had read in her eyes the blackness of her life; it was some time before he discovered the whiteness of her soul. She was to him a thing unclean, and as such he painted her. She did not change all at once; the inward awakening took time to alter the outer casement.

For many days after that first wave of shame Mimi had felt anger with herself for having experienced it, with Ralphe for having read it. Yet she was strangely drawn to him. She could not stay away, but strove, by assuming more defiance, to be again the proud Mimi. Ralphe was always so courteous, and at the same time so determined, that she usually acceded to his wishes ultimately, and soon ceased to rebel. If she said she was tired of posing and wanted to smoke, he would cease painting and find her a comfortable chair. Light was precious and must not be wasted,

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so while she rested he filled in such details as could be done without her having to stand. The studio was well warmed and Mimi received generous payment, much more than an ordinary model. Ralphe did not wish her to lose by him; he valued her beauty, and her undeveloped mind interested him. He was a poet as well as a painter, and as greatly renowned with his pen as his brush. Yes, Ralphe was a great man, living for art; the ordinary sins of men were to him a study, not a pursuit.

Once Mimi tried to prove her power. She was resting, and his back was turned towards her, or the evil thought would not have come. She watched him as he stood, the easy grace of his pose, the handsome head, so proudly held, not for vanity, but proud of the success that was rightly his, the long white fingers wielding the brush with such magic delicacy. She wished, how much she wished, that he

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would throw down the brush, and turning hold out his arms to her—how she would spring to him, how she would caress him! So intense grew her desire, her eyes flamed with passion, she half rose from her chair. Ralphe heard the movement and turned round, and pity came into his eyes as he looked at her. The look smote her conscience but did not quell her wish. She rose and came to him softly, quietly; she was full of unconscious grace in all her movements and at all times. She laid her hand on his and her face was close, very close to his.

“Love me,” she whispered in his ear.

Ralphe laid his brush and palette down and took her burning hands in his cool palms.

“Child,” he said softly, “I never insult women: to caress you when I do not love you would be to offer you insult. Don’t be angry. God made you very beautiful—oh,

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why? why has the world tarnished His handiwork?"

Ralphe continued to hold her hands and looked long into her face. She trembled, her lips quivered, she felt so much ashamed. She had never cried in her life, but now tears gathered in her eyes. Ralphe was sorry, he did not wish to make her cry. He led her back to her chair and said gently:

"You are tired; the light is failing, I will not paint any more to-day," and releasing her hands, he left her.

But Mimi did not go away immediately. The outside world seemed so barren, this studio was becoming her life, and when the picture should be finished, what then? Mimi shivered, and rising, crossed the room to look at her portrait. Yes, there she stood, clad in the scarlet and black dress she had worn the day when first she came with Bob; was it weeks

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or months ago? Most of the picture was merely sketched in so far, but her face—yes, he seemed to have decided to do that first. Had her eyes really that evil gleam? The roses in her hair were false and faded, the rose on the floor was broken. Again her eyes wandered back to the face, her face—yes, like a mirrored reflection it seemed; she almost fancied a faint breath came from the slightly-parted crimson lips. Who was she looking at? who was she beckoning? What was that grim shadow in the background? Mimi drew nearer, nearer; she had never been so close to her picture before, and as she looked she grew afraid, her face turned pale, the light died in her eyes; she looked away and then came nearer still, and her soul whispered to her that the gaunt shadow she beckoned was the shadow of death! Hastily drawing a covering over the picture, she turned away; she was trembling and her eyes looked down-

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ward. A little distance from the easel she perceived a small piece of paper, a leaf torn out of a pocket-book. Ralphe must have dropped it. She picked it up and read:

“Title for my picture, ‘God made, man wrecked, the Devil claimed!’”

Then Mimi grew angry. Was it just that she should be condemned to eternal punishment because fate had chosen for her her vocation? God made her, yes; then why should hell claim her? There was something unfair about it, something she rebelled at but could not understand. Mimi’s eyes wandered round the studio and lighted on the picture of her mountain home; yes, there was Mount Salvatori with the little chapel on the top. She remembered having climbed up through the woods one beautiful day in spring, before the mountain-side was disfigured by the railway. Inside the chapel was a book in which

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visitors wrote, and there, in German, she had read these words: "There is no room for revenge in the House of God."

She had wondered what revenge had meant; she knew now, and clenching her hands, cried:

"It is you, *grand'mère*, who should burn in hell, not me, not me."

Natalie had been right in her surmise: Mimi cursed her when she understood. The studio, with its beautiful pictures, graceful statuary, Persian rugs, and many flowers, seemed to mock her with its simple loveliness, its placid solitude, its musical silence. Mimi felt common, vulgar, tawdry—yes, even ugly; neither of which was she. The studio made her think. She cursed its air of purity, as she had cursed Natalie's black heart, and rushed away; out into the boulevard with its noise, its rush of humanity, its fever called Life! Back went Mimi to the cafés and the

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bals. Since she had sat to Ralphe, she had not frequented her usual haunts; the women had envied her what they thought must be her good fortune, the men had laughed and said, "She will grow tired, she will come back." And when she danced that night at the *Moulin Rouge*, the women were surprised that she wore no jewels, even her frock was an old one.

"If she has been away with a lover, he must have been *très très pauvre*," said one woman to another. "Ah, but la belle Mimi is a fool. With her beauty she might rule Paris and ruin princes."

"Mimi is of the people, she comes back," answered a man.

The next day Mimi did not go to the studio, nor the next, nor the day after that; she was steeped in dissipation, and the daylight hours were passed in sleep. Then she received a kind note from Ralphe, asking if she were

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ill; if so, would she let him know, and he would try and help her. Civility from a man who was not a lover! Poor Mimi, in her rebellious mood, a blow would have hurt her less. She was lying in bed when the *concierge* brought up the note. The sun was trying to force its way in through the dirty blinds, and the birds on the roof were twittering; the room was as untidy and dirty as the room she was wont to live in at San Mamette so long ago; she was an Italian, and dirt did not appear to count in her reckoning of life's disadvantages. But the note seemed to bring with it a clean air from the studio, and again Mimi felt ashamed.

"Any answer?" asked the *concierge*. "The messenger is waiting."

"No," sullenly replied Mimi; then springing up as the *concierge* was about to pass through the door, she cried:

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"Yes, yes; say I will go to-day—and bring me some water."

"Water? the pump is still in the courtyard," the *concierge* replied.

"Bring me a bucketful—no, two! and I'll give you a franc."

The *concierge* departed, and Mimi sprang out of bed. She rushed to a mirror on the wall, a mirror framed in tarnished gilt, adorned with a huge bow of pink and blue ribbon. Mimi looked at her reflection in this glass. She saw two huge dark eyes still heavy with the misspent hours, the brilliant colouring of her face, soiled by the lips that had touched, the tangled mass of blue-black hair, and the little purple mark on her throat where teeth had played: Mimi remembered, and a blush stole over her.

Would the water never come? Mimi wanted to be clean. It arrived at last, and when her toilet was completed, she ran quickly down

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the stairs; at the bottom stood Bob. He regarded her severely, and there was disappointment in his voice as he said, "Mimi, why don't you go to Ralphe now? You should not offend so great a man."

"He is not a man, he is God!" said Mimi, and rushed past him.

When she arrived at the studio, Ralphe received her kindly and asked no questions. She was very quiet, and as the morning advanced, Ralphe felt perplexed. Something of evil had left her eyes, and another light shone faintly in them; the soul of Mimi was showing through the casement. Ralphe had never known her to be silent for so long a time; he did not disturb her meditations, but worked and pondered. Presently she asked what the sound of falling water outside the windows meant.

"The spring is here, and the fountains are playing," he replied.

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There was a long pause, and then Mimi asked with an odd little catch in her voice:

“Can nothing clean sin?”

“All sin may be cleansed by sacrifice,” answered Ralphe.

CHAPTER XI.

APRIL was a lovely month that year in Paris. Nature's tears fell and washed away the grime of winter thought; then the sun shone, and the sap rose in the trees, and the fresh, sweet grass and dainty green leaves were fragrant with new life. Mimi gave away her old clothes and bought new ones, subdued in colour, so that they should not look garish in Ralphe's studio, and the soft tints and simple make enhanced her brilliant beauty, and showed more clearly the outlines of her perfect form. To do her justice, she was innocent of the desire to make herself more attractive in Ralphe's eyes, she only wanted to be nearer to his standard of good taste. The black and

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scarlet frock could not be discarded, the picture was not yet finished. And Mimi danced no more at the *Moulin Rouge* or the *Bal Bullier*. To the cafés she must go to feed, but she selected quieter one's, and gradually the *demi-monde* to which she had belonged began to forget her. At first it was difficult to try to live on what she received from Ralphe; she had been used to squandering money, and money might be easily obtained—there lay a temptation. Yet it was harder still to try to kill her animal passions, in fact to conquer herself—here lay for Mimi the greater temptation. But she had thought it all out, and in her mind had decided that perhaps loneliness was her sacrifice, each sin left undone seemed to bring her nearer to Ralphe, in that lay her solace. However, the restful lull in her life did not last long; it had come so gently, like a beautiful sunset, and then vanished.

One evening, just when the twilight began to

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deepen into long shadows, Mimi paused in her solitary walk to watch the flower-sellers at the bottom of the Madeleine steps; the flowers were so beautiful—the lenten lilies, narcissi, and sweet Parma violets, such dainty emblems of spring. Mimi observed how the careful market-women packed the blossoms in rush baskets, to keep them fresh for the next day's sale, and while she stood wondering if these rough, ugly women really enjoyed life or prized the flowers they handled daily, her arm was suddenly seized and a hoarse voice cried "MIMI!" Turning quickly round she beheld Pierre! He did not relinquish his hold on her arm, and his wild eyes flashed as he said: "Found at last!"

It took Mimi some seconds to get over her surprise, Pierre had so completely passed out of her life. Now his presence brought other memories, and her face darkened to a scowl as she asked with bitterness:

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"What of *grand'mère*, is *she* alive?"

"I killed her," answered Pierre, looking straight into Mimi's eyes.

"I am glad!" she said, and the Mimi of old seemed for a moment to exist as she uttered those words. Pierre was happy that his deed had found favour, he forgot the months of privation through which he had passed, forgot the terrors of the search, forgot the horror of the dead woman's face, forgot the hatred burning in his heart for the man he had yet to kill—forgot all, except that he was with Mimi, and Mimi was pleased with him. They walked back together in the direction of Mimi's lodgings. Pierre was poorly clad, unkempt, and looked ill-nourished. Mimi had neither affection nor admiration for him, but he was a link to her beloved mountains, he came from the only home she had known, he belonged, like herself, to Italy. As they walked and talked Mimi recalled to memory those she had known

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in the old days, and derived a certain pleasure in hearing about them.

How was Mademoiselle Pauline? Did the laundry thrive? And what of Donna Nuro? Did the pleasure steamers still traverse the Lake Lugano? And the birds in the Public Gardens, were the big cages still there? and so on, and so on.

"And where is he?" asked Pierre at length.

"Who?" asked Mimi.

"Your lover," answered Pierre, with something of the old fierceness in his tone.

"I have no lover now," Mimi replied, and there was simple dignity in her voice.

"Then you are free?" cried Pierre.

Mimi did not answer. They had arrived at the entrance to the courtyard where she lived; the houses on either side were let out in tenements to artists, the poorer actresses, and . . . others. Mimi paused and considered—no, on second thoughts she would not take Pierre to her

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rooms; no man had crossed her threshold since——.

“We will finish our talk at a café round the corner,” she said abruptly, and turned away.

Why mayn’t I go to your room? You lied to me, your lover is there!” cried Pierre.

“You will come to the café or leave me altogether,” said Mimi, with her old spirit, and to the café they went. Mimi ordered some supper, and then asked Pierre where he was staying, and what he was doing.

It appeared that during his search for Mimi his work had been somewhat varied. He had given up being a regular waiter, as that meant staying too long in one place, and had degenerated into an odd man to help temporarily in any hotel, doing either kitchen work or running errands. He had also tried being a street hawker, but since his arrival in Paris had obtained more settled work, coming to the conclusion that Paris would take long to search;

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and strange to say he rented an attic not far from Mimi.

"Now I will get better work, and save money," he said; "for if you speak the truth and have no lover, I'll marry you."

"No, Pierre," answered Mimi; "I shall never marry you, and if you worry me I shall not see you again."

"How do you live?" asked Pierre, looking suspiciously at the dainty powder blue voile Mimi was wearing.

"I sit for my portrait," she replied. "I only get two hundred francs a week, but living don't cost much when you're careful."

"Why, Mimi, you're rich. Two hundred francs!"

"Oh, that's nothing. Why, I've made as much as——" and then Mimi paused, ashamed.

"Mimi, I don't understand you. You've altered in a way; what is it?"

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"I don't know," said Mimi; but she did, despite her denial.

"Why won't you marry me?"

"Because I don't love you."

"Did you love the beast you went away with?"

"No, oh no!" cried Mimi with disgust.

"Do you love any one else?" asked Pierre.

Mimi was silent. Did she love? O God, yes, how much, how much! and in silence she suffered the weight of her devotion. Pierre was answered by the agony depicted in her face, and the old hatred of some one unknown came back to him, and he brooded till Mimi said "Good night" and bade him go to his attic.

.
In the morning, when Mimi left the courtyard, Pierre was waiting for her at the corner of the street. Mimi was vexed; she liked to be alone with her thoughts when going to the

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studio. It was at night that loneliness became a pain and not a pleasure; and so Mimi bade Pierre angrily go back to his work. He pretended to obey, but followed her at a distance. Days passed away, and each morning Pierre watched her. He gave up his work. Why toil? Mimi had vowed she would never marry him; a little night-work would pay for his few needs. It was during the day that Mimi visited the great house where the fountains played in the courtyard and spring flowers blossomed in the urns. Pierre knew; he had peeped through the door in the courtyard. Pierre surmised much; Pierre must know all. One morning he had, as usual, watched Mimi enter, and then seated himself on a bench some distance away, but from where he could command a full view of the door. The hours passed, and he grew tired of waiting. He had read *Le Petit Parisien* through and through and smoked his last cigarette. Mimi was later than usual; and at

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length, losing all patience, he left the bench and took up his stand quite close to the door.

When Mimi came out she looked unusually happy. There was a sweet expression of contentment on her face, and her hands were full of flowers. At the sight of her all the passion in Pierre's heart burst forth into flame. How he loved her! and yet he could have strangled her because she was not his. The smile faded from her face when he clutched her arm. She hated him! he had stepped heavily and stilled the music of her dream. Pierre read the change in her face, and a fierce rage shook him.

"You lied to me!" he hissed. "You lied when you said you had no lover. You have just left him: Ralph is your lover!"

"I would to God he were!" cried Mimi, and the cry came from her heart.

"He gave you those flowers," said Pierre.

"Yes," answered Mimi, and the sweet smile

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returned again to her face as she looked at them.

With a savage oath, Pierre snatched the blossoms from her hands, and throwing them into the gutter stamped and spat on them. Mimi stood quite still for a second, and then she sprang forward and struck Pierre a fierce blow across the mouth with her clenched fist. The blow was a hard one, weighted by the strength of intense hatred. His lips cut against his teeth, and blood spouted out over Mimi's knuckles. For a second Pierre was stung with pain; then the fury of hell shone from his eyes. He would have drawn his knife to any one else, but Mimi in the wild beauty of her anger still conquered him. He seized her wrists and held them in a tight grip.

"You shall be mine now!" he cried, "or by all the saints I swear that I will——" He looked the rest of the threat, and his bleeding lips closed over his clenched teeth.

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"Let me go!" cried Mimi, "let me go! I hate you, and if you dare speak to me again I'll tell the *sergents de ville* you murdered my *grand'mère*; then I shall be rid of you."

Pierre loosened his hold on her wrists, and with another oath turned away and left her. He did not look back; his head was bowed, dark thoughts passed through his throbbing brain, and as he walked he fondled the handle of his knife. He was an Italian, and always carried one. Mimi watched his retreating form until he was lost to view; then she stooped and picked up the crushed flowers from the gutter, and carrying them to a horse-trough near, washed them tenderly.

CHAPTER XII.

THE next morning the sunshine awakened Mimi, and when she sprang out of bed her first thought was of the flowers; she felt very happy, for during the night they had revived, and now seemed to smile at her. The room was no longer dirty as of yore, neither was it so tawdry. Over the door hung a curtain of the same hue and texture as the studio draperies. In one corner of the room stood an easel, and on it a sketch of Lugano painted by Ralphe, given to her by Ralphe, and oh, how dearly prized! The flowers were placed on either side in blue china bowls, purchased by Mimi because they reminded her of some Ralphe possessed. The whole room was arranged in a manner to remind her of the

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studio. She hummed a merry tune while making her toilet, and then tripped gaily downstairs, calling out a pleasant "*Bonjour, Marie,*" to the *concierge* when she passed her door. Just for a moment she looked anxious when, leaving the courtyard, she emerged into the street, afraid lest Pierre should have disobeyed her and be waiting; but he was nowhere in sight, so she went on her way rejoicing in the thought that her threat had banished him for ever.

Life seemed to sing that morning; Mimi had never felt so happy. After all, it is with one's soul that one experiences the greatest joys or the deepest griefs, and Mimi's beautiful body had become subservient to her awakened soul. She was still and always would be an intensely passionate woman, but now all her desires, all her yearnings, all her affection flowed into one great channel, and was transformed into a love for Ralphe, so immense in

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its strength as to be almost more than human. God-like, she gave all and asked nothing in return; love had redeemed her. When she entered the studio, it was empty; Ralphe had evidently not yet started work. Mimi took down the black and scarlet dress from where it hung behind a curtain, and then retired to a corner of the studio that had been screened off to make a little dressing-room for her. How tawdry the black and scarlet gauze now seemed! Mimi hated the frock: it reminded her too much of the debauchery of the past, and as she put it on, she hoped it was for the last time. The picture of the courtesan was practically finished, but Ralphe had said he wished to paint another picture with Mimi for the subject. She was lingering over her dressing and looking at her reflection in a long mirror when she thought she heard a door open, so concluding that Ralphe must have entered, she hastily fastened the last hook,

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pinned the faded roses in her hair, and came out from behind the screens; but to her surprise no one was there. She must have been mistaken.

In order not to keep Ralphe waiting when he should come, she crossed to the model's throne and stood in her usual pose. Then a wave of depression swept over Mimi. She had been so happy outside in the sunshine; now it seemed as though the sun had suddenly set, and she had outstayed its glory. The silence of the studio that was wont to be so peaceful became oppressive, the tinkle of the fountains playing in the courtyard sounded with a curious monotony; Mimi changed her pose and grew fidgety and restless. Something about the studio was different, what was it? Mimi's eyes wandered nervously round, searching for the cause. Ah! there it was: the flowers were different. How foolish it seemed that even a slight alteration in the arrange-

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ment of the studio should upset her so. How intensely she must have grown to love each detail. All the coloured flowers and plants had been removed, and in their place were high white lilies standing on bronze tripods, and these were placed on another model's throne near a portion of the studio that had for some time been boarded off. Mimi had asked why, and Ralphe had explained that a window was being altered. The boarding had now been removed, and a dark ugly curtain covered the wall from the roof to the floor.

While Mimi was taking note of these alterations, Ralphe entered, and all her nervousness vanished at the sound of his cheery "*Bonjour, Mimi.*" He was accompanied by his favourite student, Bob, who seemed very happy at the prospect of the honour to be accorded to him of seeing "the Master's" finished picture of Mimi. Ralphe bade Mimi assume her usual pose; he then drew a covering away from the

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picture on the easel and stood aside, while Bob gazed first at the model and then at the picture, and then back again. There was silence for a few seconds, and then, looking at Ralphe almost with reverence, Bob cried, "*Mon Dieu*, how great you are!"

Ralphe bowed.

Again Bob surveyed the picture, but a puzzled expression came into his face.

"Yes?" asked Ralphe questioningly; he had noticed the perplexed look.

"It is wonderful, but——" Bob hesitated. The "Master's" work was beyond reproach; still there was something he could not understand.

"What is it?" Ralphe asked kindly. "Don't be afraid to say."

"It is Mimi as she was, but not as she is," Bob answered.

"You are right," Ralphe replied quietly. But Mimi heard, and his words thrilled her.

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"There will be a companion picture," continued Ralphe; "and though I don't usually tell my plans beforehand, I will make an exception with you. Had you noticed no difference, then I should not show you my new conception, for you would not understand; now I feel that you will."

Turning from Bob to Mimi, he handed her a white robe that had lain on the floor of the other model throne, and bade her change her dress.

"Loosen your hair," he said, "and throw it back from your brow—let it fall carelessly and naturally, and wear no jewellery."

The robe was of pure white linen, so fine in texture as to be softer than the softest silk, sleeveless, and cut straight across the bosom; it hung in long, graceful folds, displaying to perfection Mimi's beautifully-moulded throat and arms, yet giving no suggestion of undue nakedness. It did not take Mimi long to

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remove her other clothing and put on this robe, lovely in its chaste simplicity. She would have liked to linger and fondle its soft sweetness, but Ralphe must not be kept waiting; so with her hair falling round her almost to her knees, her white forehead free from even a single curl, and her eyes open wide with anxious wish to please, she came forth from behind the screens.

“How lovely!” cried Bob in amazement.

Ralphe said nothing, but his smile showed satisfaction, and then walking to the side of the studio where the boarding had been, he pulled a cord, and the ugly dark curtain was drawn to one side.

The studio was instantly flooded with new light, as though the sun had settled on a million jewels and thrown their radiant beauty forth into the room. The light came through an exquisite window of coloured glass, gorgeous in colour, perfect in design. Bob said nothing:

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the glory was too great for words. Mimi crossed herself. The story the window told was the solution to the Sex Problem of all times, ancient and modern. Christ was seated in the Temple, and before Him stood the woman who had been taken in adultery; her face represented a tragedy of anguish, His a poem of Pity. Underneath was a scroll, and these words written in gold—

"Go, and sin no more."

.
A sob rose in Bob's throat; no one spoke; Mimi, with hands clasped, seemed to drink in the eloquence of the message. Then Ralphe lifted a chair of quaint Eastern design and placed it on the throne beneath the window; the tripods, with their white lilies, were on either side, and Ralphe bade Mimi rise and seat herself. He arranged the soft white

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draperies across her feet; one arm lay along the carved chair, the hand falling carelessly, and in the other he placed a stem of white lilies. Mimi sat upright, her wealth of hair falling like a cloud around her. He stood back and surveyed her critically.

"Turn your eyes to your beloved mountains," he cried, pointing to Mimi's favourite picture.

She did so, but he was not satisfied.

"No, no! The expression will not do. Sit quite still and look at me."

Mimi did as she was bidden, and her eyes, gazing at the man she loved—nay, worshipped—assumed an expression so full of yearning tenderness that they became virginal in the greatness of their adoration.

"Yes," murmured Bob, "I understand," and his gaze wandered from Mimi's pathetic eyes to the window behind her.

Ralphe also ceased to look into the wonder in Mimi's eyes, and, standing in a contem-

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plative attitude, surveyed the living picture as a whole. When he withdrew his gaze from Mimi's face, she, not knowing why, shivered with cold fear, and with a weird feeling of apprehension turned her eyes, as though compelled by an inward conviction of coming danger, to a large statue that stood in front of a curtain some distance to the rear of Ralphe. A chilly sweat broke through her every pore, for coming from behind the statue she saw a dark head lit up by two wild, angry eyes. These eyes glared at Ralphe, and a thin figure, clothed in black, slowly moved out from its hiding-place. Not a sound could be heard in the studio as the figure crept from behind the statue. Mimi recognised Pierre crouching there, like a tiger ready to spring, a knife shining in his hand. Only for the fraction of a second did she feel turned to stone, and then, with a swiftness bred of the mountains, she leaped from the throne and received full

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between the breasts the stab intended for the man she loved. With a bound Ralphe and Bob sprang forward. Bob threw his full weight upon the Italian, and with a blow felled him to the ground, his hand still clutching the handle of his knife, now wet with Mimi's blood. Ralphe caught her falling body. Kneeling on the floor, he held her so tenderly, one hand trying vainly to stanch the blood that rushed with crimson swiftness from her bosom. Bob succeeded in wrenching the knife from Pierre's grasp, and then he bound him hand and foot with some loose draperies lying near. Pierre was stunned and speechless. Leaving him where he had fallen, Bob then rushed away for aid. When he returned he found Ralphe still holding Mimi in his arms; the blood did not now flow so quickly, but her eyes were closed and her face of ashen whiteness. Silently Bob bathed her face with water, and brought cushions, so that

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she could be laid gently down; but still Ralphe crouched beside her, one hand covering the wound on her breast, the other arm a pillow for her head.

"I fear she will die," he said, and his voice shook with emotion.

"So young and so beautiful! Why, she looks like a child now," murmured Bob; and then he cried: "Good God, what a sacrifice!"

Sacrifice? Mimi's lips quivered, and her eyes opened at the word. Ralphe's face was very near hers.

"Sacrifice?" she echoed softly. "What was that you said once—a long time ago—about sin and sacrifice?"

"All sin may be cleansed by sacrifice," Ralphe answered, and there were tears in his voice.

Mimi's eyes closed again for a few seconds, and then, when she opened them, a glad light shone in their depths, and a smile of wondrous

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sweetness played round her lips as she whispered, with wistful eagerness in her weak voice:

"Am I clean now?"

Ralphe gently kissed her forehead.

THE END.



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